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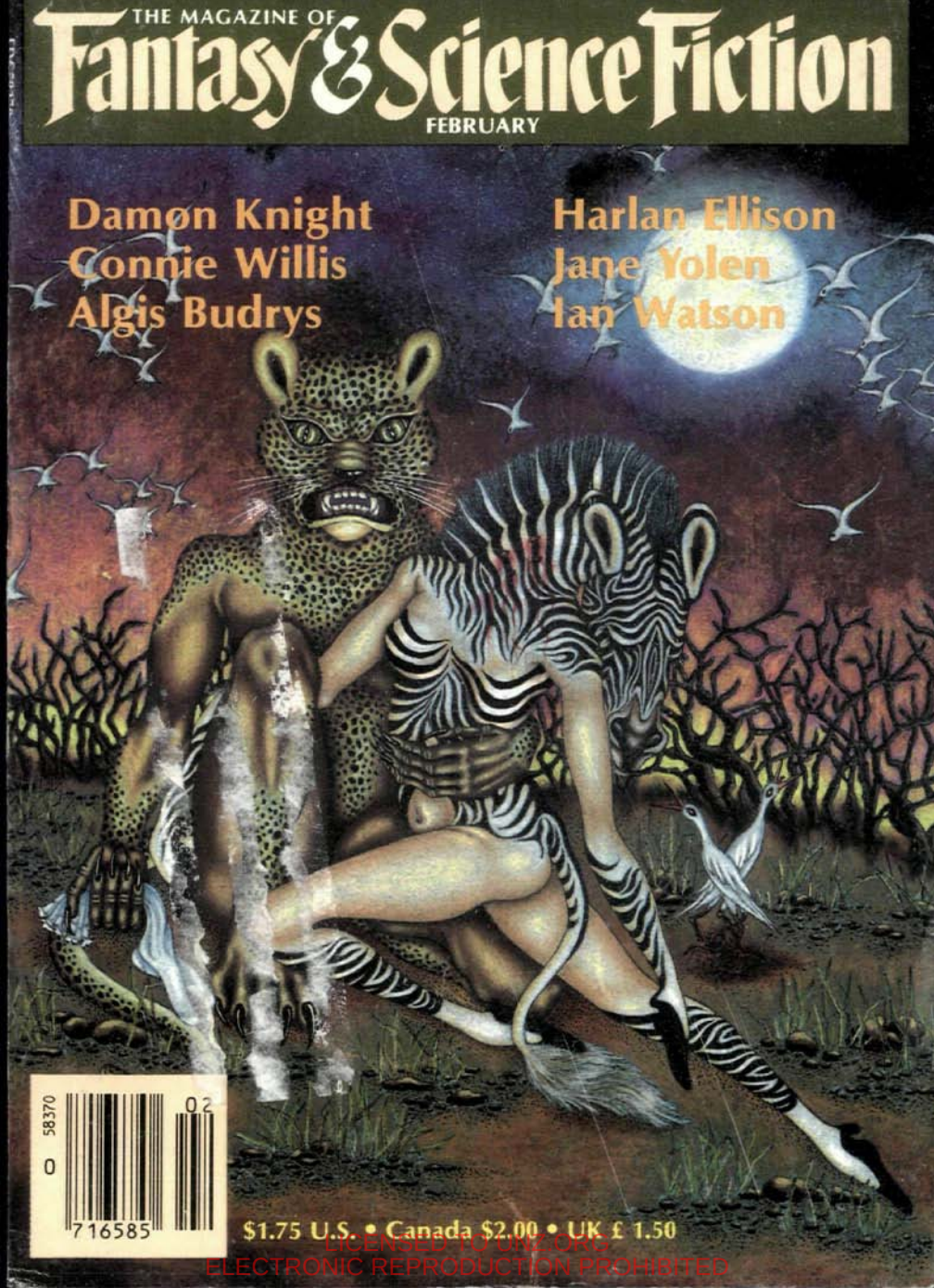

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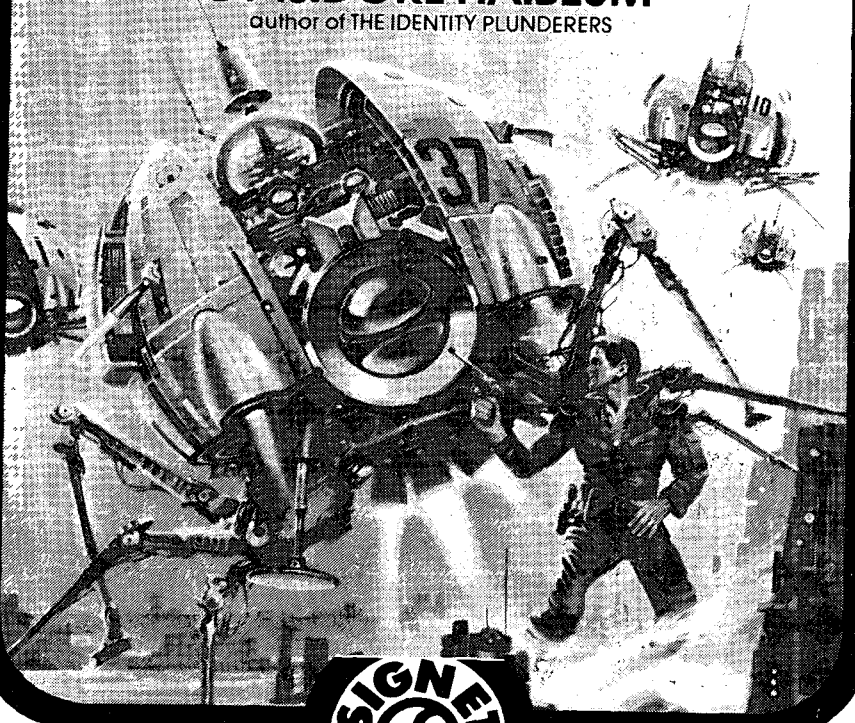

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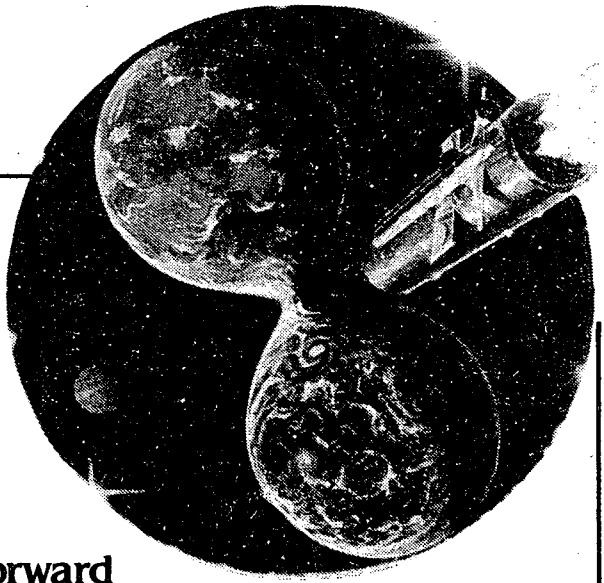

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Connie Willis has developed into one of the premier short story writers in the field. Her last story here was "Service for the Burial of the Dead," (November 1982). Her latest story is from the forthcoming book BERSERKER X SEVEN, a collection of tales about Fred Saberhagen's berserkers, which are terrifying war machines whose mission is to destroy all organic life.

With Friends Like These

BY
CONNIE WILLIS

"You're going up," Gemma said.

Pat yanked his boot on. "Yes."

"Even when you know how the Cotabote feel about it?"

"I do *not* know how they feel. About this or anything else. Maybe you can tell me. You're the big expert on the Cotabote. How do they feel? If they feel. Which I doubt." He pulled on his boot, which had shrunk in the continual damp of Botea. He wrenched it over his ankle and stamped down hard.

"You don't even try to get along with them!" Gemma said angrily. Her cheeks were blushed a dark rose under her black skin, and she looked so beautiful he felt angrier than ever.

"Get along with them? You spend all your time trying to get along with them, and where does it get you?"

"It wouldn't kill you to put it off a week. You said it was routine. Is there something you're not telling me?"

"It is routine," Pat said. "You're starting to sound like the Cotabote. I have to do an orbital survey of the diamond mines once every six weeks. Exxon says so. And your Cotabotes are so worried about my worms digging up in the middle of their village, they should be glad I'm keeping tabs on them."

He did need to check on the orbiting infrascopes that kept an eye on the mechanical digger worms and their movements through the coal, but that was't why he'd kicked the date up a few days. He'd gotten a transmission from Exxon that a berserker had wiped out a settlement planet called Polara. It was the second report on a berserker in three months, and it had been only two weeks later than the transmission date, which meant Exxon considered the informa-

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tion important enough to send it by ship at least as far as Candlestone, which was the closest relay. Exxon hadn't considered it important enough to ship it the whole way, or maybe the operator at Candlestone had made that decision, but Pat chose to take that as a hopeful sign that Exxon didn't consider the berserker to be anywhere in the neighborhood. If they had thought it was, they would have raced to Botea with a navy. After all, they had to protect all those IIIB diamonds the worms were digging out of Botea's coal deposits. Still, he appreciated the warning and the masses of general data on berserkers that had accompanied the transmissions, and he intended to go up and check on the orbital defenses, Cotabote or no Cotabote.

"It's only been thirty-five days since your last survey," Gemma said. "The Cotabote say you're up to something. They want me to file a protest."

"So what else is new?" he said. "Go right ahead." He gestured toward the computer. "What are they worried about this time? Their smash crop?"

"No," she said. She sat down in front of the voice terminal. "They say the harpy hurts the nematej."

"The nematej?" Pat said. He stamped his foot into his boot and stood up. "What exactly could I do to it that could possibly make it worse than it is already?"

"They say the last time you did an orbital survey, it started to smell funny." She glared at him, as if daring him to laugh.

He was too amazed to laugh. "Nematej already smells like vomit, for God's sake," he said. "It's got thorns everywhere, even on its flowers, and the last time I looked, it was choking off their stinking smash crop." He shook his head. "They're incredible, you know that? I've been here two years, and they still come up with new ways to make my life miserable."

"What do you call telling them your planet-range ship is called a harpy? That's what I mean. You just try to antagonize them. Scamballah is living in terror because she thinks the ship's going to swoop down and carry off one of her daughters."

"I'll bet. Scamballah's never been in terror of anything, except the thought that I might be enjoying myself. So you're going to file another protest, huh? Hasn't it ever occurred to you to tell them that, ICLU or no ICLU, you're sick and tired of sending their protests for them?"

"You have to give me access," she said stiffly. "Or are you going to inform me that you're sick and tired of doing that?" She handed him the voice terminal.

He yanked it out of her hand. "Access for Gemenca Bahazi, ICLU rep," he said, and handed it back to her. "Go ahead, file protest number five thousand."

"I will," she said. "I want to file a

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protest to Exxon Fossil Fuel and Diamond Chip Corporation on behalf of the Cotabote," she told the computer.

"Sure thing, sweetheart," the computer said.

Gemma scowled at Pat.

"How many protests is this, anyway?" Pat said. "A million? Two million?"

"Two hundred and eighty-one," Gemma said.

"This will be Protest No. 283, darling," the computer said. "What title do you wish to give this protest, you cute thing?"

"Title it 'Refusal to Cooperate,' " Gemma said grimly.

Pat put on his flight shortcoat, stuck a portable voice terminal in the pocket, and then stood and watched Gemma at the terminal. She had stopped talking and was frowning. Even frowning, she was beautiful, which was good because she was usually frowning at him. He told himself it was because an ICLU natives' representative was not supposed to smile at the Exxon engineer who was mining the planet out from under those natives, especially with the Cotabote on her neck all the time. When he wasn't furious with her, he felt sorry for her, having to live in the Cotabote village and put up with them twenty-six hours a day.

"Give me a listing for all the protests filed this month," she said, and frowned at the screen some more.

"What's the matter?" Pat said. "You lose a protest?"

"No," she said, "I've got an extra one. You've been locking the door when you leave the office, haven't you?"

"I'm surprised you didn't accuse me of erasing a protest. Yes, of course, I lock it. It's keyed to my voice. So's the computer. You probably just forgot one. Admit it. I do that for you."

"Do what?"

"Make you forget what you're doing. You're crazy about me. You just won't admit it."

"Read me the titles of those protests," she said. "Without any 'sweethearts,' please."

"If that's the way you want it, honey," the computer said. " 'Refusal to Cooperate,' 'Refusal to Cooperate,' 'Endangering Lives,' 'Refusal to Cooperate,' 'Threatening the Cotabote,' 'Refusal...' "

Patrick leaned down and said, "Shut up," into the voice terminal.

"Come with me," he said.

"What?" she said, and looked up at him, still frowning.

"Come up in the harpy with me."

"I can't," she said. "The Cotabote wouldn't like it."

"Of course they wouldn't like it. When do they ever like anything? Come anyway."

"But they already think . . ." she said, and blushed. It was a sight beautiful to behold, the rose color coming up under the black. She turned her

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head away. Pat bent closer.

"Is this how you talk Devil out of his orbital survey?" Scamballah said. "I sent you here to file a protest, not to flirt with the Exxon representative. I've told you over and over again he's just waiting for a chance to vile you."

As if they weren't belligerent, spiteful, and evil-minded, the Cotabote were also sneaky, and Scamballah was the worst. Pat called her Scumbag the day she started calling him Devil, but he wished he'd named her Skulk. She had come up the steps to the office on the outside of the railing so she wouldn't be seen, and had been clinging there next to the door for who knows how long. Now she climbed over it and came into the office with her youngest daughter, shaking a spongy-looking finger at Gemma.

"I'm filing the protest, Scamballah," Gemma said.

"Oh, yes, you're filing it," she said, shaking her mushroom-colored finger right in Gemma's face. Gemma ought to reach over and bite it off, Pat thought. "I *told* you to find out what he was up to, but did you? Oh, no. You're *filing a protest*. And while you're sitting there, he's walking out the door. Did you tell him it was ruining the nematej?"

Scumbag's daughter had come over to stand by Gemma. She stuck her finger in her mouth and then used it to draw on the terminal screen.

"Gemma told me," Pat said. "I thought the Cotabote considered the nematej a noxious weed."

"I wanna picture," Scumbag's daughter whined. "Make her make a picture." She stomped her feet. "I wanna picture *now*."

Gemma typed up a picture, apparently not trusting her voice to ask the computer anything.

"Not *that* picture!" she wailed. "I want a different picture!"

"The Cotabote will decide what is and is not a weed, and not you," Scamballah said. "You, Devil, are *only* the Exxon engineer. In our contract, it states clearly that you will not harm our crops or our village."

The Cotabote loved quoting their beloved contract, which Pat had never seen. He had heard it was a doozy, though. Scumbag's daughter began punching buttons wildly on the computer keyboard.

"I haven't hurt your crops or your village, and I haven't done anything to the nematej, either. Yet."

"A threat!" Scamballah shrieked. "He threatened me. You heard that, Gemenca. He threatened me. File a protest!"

He wondered exactly how she was supposed to do that with that imbecilic brat beating the keyboard senseless.

"Scamballah," Gemma said calmly. "I'm sure he didn't mean . . ."

"That's right. Take his side. I knew he'd corrupt you. We forbid the orbital survey. Tell him that, Gemenca." She

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waved an arm at Gemma. "You're our representative. Tell him."

"I have told him . . ." Gemma began.

"And *I* told her to keep her nose out of Exxon's business," Pat said. He snatched up his acceleration helmet. "She's not going with me, and that's final."

Scamballah whirled to glare at Gemma. "You weren't supposed to tell him you were going with him. Oh, I knew I shouldn't have let you come alone. I've seen the way you look at him! You wanted to be alone with him, didn't you? Filthy! Filthy!"

Scamballah's daughter had given up on the keyboard and was standing on the computer and taking down a mine mask from the wall. Pat took it away from her.

"Alone with me? Ha. She wanted to spy on my orbital survey, and I said, 'Over my dead body.' "

Scamballah's daughter wailed.

"You will take her!" Scumbag shrieked. "I say you will! We'll file a protest."

"Scamballah," Gemma said. "Don't listen to him. He's . . ."

Scumbag's daughter was reaching for the energy rifles on the wall above the masks.

"I'm going," Pat said. "You can file your protest when I get back." He picked up the command core to the harpy and the extra helmet, and opened the door. "Everybody out. Now."

"You can't force us out of your office!" Scumbag said, but she grabbed her daughter by the neck and dragged her down the steps, still bellowing.

Gemma was still standing by the computer.

"You, too," he said, and handed her the helmet. She wouldn't take it. She walked past him, out the door, and down the steps.

Pat shut the door and stomped out to the ramp of the harpy, nearly tripping over a heap of smash leaves and nematej branches the Cotabote had left as offerings. They were terrified of or fascinated by machines — Pat had not been able to figure out which — and were constantly leaving them presents or sacrifices. Probably not sacrifices, since he felt human sacrifices would be more in line with the way the Cotabote thought, which, considering Scamballah's daughter, might not be a half-bad idea.

He turned at the top of the ramp, trying to gauge if Gemma was close enough to grab. She was. "I won't take her, Scumbag, and that's final," he said.

"You will, or I'll tear up our contract!"

Pat tried to look like that had made an impression on him. "Get in," he said gruffly, and yanked Gemma up and into the harpy.

"Shut the door," he told the computer. The ramp retracted and the door slid shut. Pat tossed Gemma her

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helmet and went forward to insert the command core into the harpy's drive computer. Scamballah started banging on the door.

"Hurry," Gemma said, pulling on a flight coat.

Pat looked up at her in surprise. "What did you say?"

"Nothing," she said.

"Strap yourself in," he said, and slid into the pilot's seat. "We're going up fast."

He hit the ground jets hard. Scumbag and her daughter backed up to a respectful distance. He eased the harpy out of the clearing and took her straight up.

There was a lot of junk orbiting Botea, all of it Exxon's: the infrascopes, mappers, and geos for the mines; the big relay that sent Gemma's protests plodding across the galaxy to Candlestone and then to Exxon; and the various defense satellites. Botea had two orbital atomic guns and assorted 15-T and 8-T exploders, all aimed at anybody who tried to steal Botea's precious IIIB diamonds. The selectively conductive crystals, the only thing kilolayered computer chips could be made from, were found on other planets, but always halfway to the core and in nearly diamond-hard newkimberlite deposits. On Botea they were practically lying in heaps on the ground. Well, not quite, but only a little way down in veins of soft yellow coal, and nothing standing in the way of getting them out except some soft deposits of coal the worms could chew their way through. And of course the Cotabote. The defenses were really intended for pirates or small independent fighters, not an armored arsenal like a berserker was supposed to be, but at least they were there.

Pat stayed clear of the minefield of satellites and set a lower orbit that would keep him close enough to do visuals on everything without putting him on a collision course. He had taken off far too fast, which meant he had a lot of correcting to do, and it was a good fifteen minutes before he and the computer got the harpy into the orbit he wanted. He told the computer to run a check on all defense satellites, with orders for the computer to tell him when the atomic gun came into line of sight, and hoped Gemma wouldn't realize that wasn't part of his usual routine.

She had taken off her acceleration helmet and was hunched forward so she could see Botea out the tiny forward viewport.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" he said. Botea was covered with clouds, which was good because the swamps and smash fields were a nasty green even from this distance. At least you couldn't smell them up here, Pat thought. "Aren't you glad I suggested you come with me?"

"Suggested?" she said, trying to get

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out of her straps. "You practically kidnapped me!"

"Kidnapped you?" he said. He unhooked his straps and latched onto one of the overhead skyhooks. "All I did was use a little reverse psychology on old Scumbag."

"You shouldn't call her that. She'll probably file a protest."

"Then I'll file one over her calling me Devil. And don't tell me she can't pronounce it. She knows exactly what she's doing."

Gemma still didn't have her straps free. "You still shouldn't antagonize them. Exxon could . . ."

"Could what?" he said. He bent over to help her with her straps. "They haven't answered any of the Cotabote's 283 protests in over two years, have they?"

"Two hundred and eighty-one," Gemma said, and frowned again. Pat got her straps unhooked, and she drifted straight into his arms. He put his free hand around her waist.

"Well, well, so Scumbag was right," he said. "You were just waiting for your chance to be alone with me."

"The Cotabote think . . ." she said, and he waited for her to blush again, but she didn't. She suddenly smiled at him. "You really handled the whole thing very well. Maybe you should be the ICLU representative. You have a real gift for making people do what you want."

"I do?" he said, and let go of the skyhook so he could put his other arm around her. "Does that include you?"

"I . . ." She grabbed for a skyhook and used it to give herself a push that brought him up smartly against the bulkhead.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm not used to no gravity." She turned and looked out the side port. "Is that one of the infrascopes you're supposed to be checking on?"

He hand-over-handed himself till he was right behind her. "Which one?" he said and put his hand over hers to make sure she stayed on the skyhook this time.

"That spiky one," she said. He put his other hand on her shoulder and turned her to face him. "It sends me weather reports. It lets me know when there's a storm brewing."

"Oh," she said, a little breathlessly. "What's the weather like now?"

"Right now," he said, and put his hand under her chin, "I'd say the outlook is very favorable."

"Atomic gun's coming up," the computer said.

"You have great timing," Pat said. "I'll be right back," he said to Gemma, and worked his way back to the computer. The terminal screen was still blank, and he couldn't see anything in the forward port, either. "Where's the gun?" he said.

"Is that it?" Gemma said from the side port. "The big black thing out there."

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"What big black thing?" Pat said. "I don't see anything."

"Right there," Gemma said, and pointed. "A long ways out."

"Give me a long view," Pat told the computer. It did.

"Can you see it now?" Gemma said.

"Yes, " Pat said, "I see it." He lurched for the skyhook. "Get away from the window."

"It's huge," Gemma said. "What is it? An infrascope?"

He tackled her, and they tumbled over against the opposite bulkhead.

"I don't know what you think you're doing," Gemma said angrily from beneath him.

"It's a berserker," Pat said.

"A berserker?" she said. She grabbed for a skyhook and pulled herself up to face him. "A berserker?" she whispered. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," he said.

"The atomic gun is full-screen," the computer said. "Do you want readouts?"

"Shhh," Gemma said.

Pat said, too softly for the computer to hear, "Blast it. Blast it with everything you've got."

It was a purely instinctive reaction. The orbital guns, with their pitiful ten-megaton atomics, couldn't make any more of a dent in that thing than his energy rifle. Gemma was right. It was huge. He pulled himself back to the computer and looked at the berserker on the screen. It had to be at least a hundred kilometers farther out, and it still more than filled the screen.

Gemma eased herself into the seat beside him and strapped herself in. "What do we do now?" she said.

"I don't know." They were both whispering. "If I hit the jets, it'll see us. If it hasn't already."

He didn't have to say anything else. Gemma had heard of berserkers, too, or she wouldn't be gripping the arms of her acceleration seat like that. She knew just as well as he did that it intended to destroy every speck of life on Botea, including the nematej. And Pat and Gemma, who had just happened by.

"If it had seen us, it would have blown us up," Gemma said. "Which means it didn't. And it must not be able to hear us, either."

Which meant they could stop whispering, but they didn't. "It may think we're just a satellite. Which means our best bet is to stay where we are and wait till we've got Botea between us."

"How long will that be?"

Pat held the voice terminal right up to his lips. "Figure out how long before we're out of the line of sight with the berserker," he said softly.

"Twenty-nine minutes, fifty seconds," the computer said, and the sound was like an explosion in the cabin. Gemma flinched.

"Keep it down," Pat said. "All right, I want you to transmit pictures

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of the berserker down to Botea. Section-by-section holos, infra, X ray, everything you've got. No, wait. Put them on independents. No transmissions. And switch to visual-only for now. Go back to voice when we go out of line of sight."

"Thank you," Gemma said. "I know it can't hear us, but . . ." She drew a ragged breath and leaned forward to watch the screen with him.

What Pat saw made him feel a little better, but not much. The berserker had taken a beating. Half of its back end was missing. He didn't know where a berserker carried its arsenal, but losing a chunk that big had to have hurt something. He wondered if this was the berserker that had destroyed the settlement on Polara. If it was, they'd certainly put up a good fight. And the berserker had killed them all, he reminded himself.

"Half an hour," Gemma said, and Pat knew exactly how she felt. He itched to put the harpy on manual and take her down himself. He knew that would be suicide, but anything would be better than sitting here helplessly for the next thirty minutes, wondering when the berserker was going to notice them and blow them apart.

He spoke into the voice terminal again. "Tell me anytime we're going to be out of line of sight behind a satellite for more than" — he stopped and calculated — "two minutes." Two minutes wouldn't get them safely under Botea's cloud cover, but it might be long enough to blast them into a spiral descent that the berserker might mistake for a natural decay orbit. And whom was he kidding? The harpy hardly looked like a weather satellite.

He glared at the screen, wishing he had access to the computer's memory banks. Maybe the report from Polara and all the other berserker data Exxon had sent could be put together with the pictures he was taking to come up with a foolproof plan for destroying the berserker with only two atomic guns and some exploders. He didn't dare ask for information, though. It would have to be transmitted from the main computer, and the berserker would be bound to pick up the transmission. He couldn't call for help, either, for the same reason. Not that sending a Mayday would do any good. By the time the message crawled to Candlestone, they'd be long gone.

"It looks like it's been in a fight," Gemma said, peering at the screen. "Maybe there are ships chasing it."

Not if it just came from Polara, Pat thought. He was about to say it when he got a good look at Gemma. She looked scared to death, her shoulders hunched forward as if she were waiting for someone to hit her. The computer spit out an independent, and she took it and held it without even realizing what she was doing.

He said instead, "You bet. They're

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probably right on its tail. We'll send out a Mayday as soon as we get back down and tell them where it is."

"Will we get back down?" she said.

"Are you kidding? I always take my girls home."

She gave him a ghost of a smile.

"As soon as we get back to the computer, we'll feed all these pictures in and see if we can come up with a plan to blow that berserker apart."

She wasn't even listening to him. "When do you think it will attack?" she said.

"Not for a while. It's probably being laid up here for repairs, which means as long as it thinks we don't know it's here, it probably won't do anything at all. Maybe we can hit it before it has a chance to repair itself."

"Oh," she said, and looked relieved.

Pat wished he'd convinced himself. Even if the berserker had holed up off Botea to lick its wounds, it could still send down a deadly berserker android, armed with lasers and poisonous gases, that would be more than a match for them and the Cotabote.

The Cotabote. He'd forgotten all about them. They'd never cooperate, even if they knew what a berserker was. And why would they believe there was deadly war machine orbiting their planet when they hadn't ever believed anything he'd ever told them?

"When we get back down," Pat said, and was amazed at how confident he was when he said that, "we're going to have to take the computer down in the mine. It's the safest place. We can carry enough self-contained to make it self-sufficient. That way even if the berserker blows my office apart, we can still figure out a plan. The berserker won't be able to touch us in the mine. O.K.?"

"O.K.," Gemma said, which told Pat just how scared she was. She'd forgotten all about the Cotabote, too, and he wasn't going to remind her. Not until he had her and the computer safely down in the mine, with the fire doors shut.

"Well," he said. "What do you think of our first date so far?"

She looked over at him, shocked, and then tried to smile. "Is going out with you always this exciting?" she said gamely, though her voice still had a tremor in it.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you for months," he said. "Wait'll you see where I take you on our next date."

"You will be out of line of sight in one minute," the computer said. "An infrascope and a mapper are in conjunction."

"For how long?" Gemma said.

"Six minutes and twelve seconds," the computer said.

"Is that long enough?" Gemma said.

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Pat had already started the jets. "I'll make it long enough," he said. "I promised I'd take you home, didn't I?"

The descent seemed to take forever. Pat held his breath the entire time, sure that a wrong move was going to bring them right into the berserker's view. The computer spit out independents, like ticks of a deadly clock, and Gemma picked them up and held them without even looking at them.

"Entering atmosphere," the computer said, and they both jumped.

"How're we doing?" Pat said.

"Fifteen seconds," the computer said. "There is not enough time for . . ."

"Put her on manual," Pat said, and nose-dived straight through the clouds.

Gemma pressed back against her seat, her eyes closed, and the handful of independents clutched to her like a baby.

Pat brought the harpy up sharply and headed for the office. "We made it," he said. "Now if the office is still there, we're in business."

Gemma handed Pat the deck of independents and undid her straps. "What do you want me to do?"

"You grab the independents and as much self-contained as you can carry. I'll get the rest. And the terminal."

"Are you going to send out a Mayday?"

"No. We'll take the transmitter with us. If I send it from the office, the berserker'll know that's where we are, and we won't have an office." They were coming in over the sharp-pointed trees to the office clearing.

"Maybe we should go get the Cotabote first," Gemma said.

"We get the computer first," Pat said. "You don't have to worry about the Cotabote. Even if the berserker sends a lander down, it'll probably take one look at old Scumbag and turn tail and run."

"This is hardly the time for a joke," Gemma said. "The Cotabote . . ."

"Can take care of themselves." He skidded the harpy to a stop. "Open the door," he said, and was out before it was fully up.

"Aren't you going to take the command core with you?" Gemma said.

"No. Leave it. Come on," he said, and took off at a dead run for the office.

Scamballah was standing by the output, her spongy-looking arms folded across her chest. Her husband, Rutchirrah, who was shorter than his wife and shaped like a poisonous toadstool, was holding an array of the rectangular independents as if they were a hand of cards. "What are these?" he said. "The protests you have refused to file for us?"

"Give those to me," Pat said and made a grab for them.

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Retch took a step backward. The output spit out another card. He scooped it up. "Exxon will hear about your striking a Cotabote. Gemenca, file a protest."

"Give me those independents right now," Pat said. "I don't have time to play games with you."

"Pat," Gemma said. "Let me handle this." She turned to Scamballah. "It is a good thing I went on the orbital survey with Devlin. We discovered something terrible. A berserker."

Scumbag didn't seem impressed. "Don't give me any stories. I know you let Devil vile you while you were in the harpy with him. That's why you wanted to go with him, isn't it? So you and he could do filthy things together?"

"Why, you foul-mouthed old witch!" Pat said. "She's trying to save your life. Don't waste your time, Gemma. Get the self-contained, I'll . . ."

"I said I'd handle this," Gemma said grimly. "Get the transmitter and everything else you're taking. Rutchirrah, give him the independents, and I will tell you everything that happened."

"You see, she admits it, Rutchirrah!" Scamballah said. "I told you this would happen." She was shaking her finger in front of his nose now. Pat made a grab for the independents and stuffed them in his jacket. Rutchirrah bellowed. Pat started cramming self-contained into a smash sack.

"He viled you, didn't he?" Scumbag said.

"Listen to me," Gemma said. "There is a berserker in the sky above Botea, high up, above the clouds where you can't see it. It is a terrible war machine. It will kill us all. We have to—"

"Did he vile you?" Scumbag shrieked. "Did he?"

Gemma didn't say anything for a minute, she just looked at Scumbag, and Pat was sure she was going to give up. He waited, ready to hand her the transmitter and a sack.

"He tried to vile me," she said, "but I wouldn't let him."

"Oh, thanks a lot," Pat said. He back-to-backed a voice terminal and the transmitter and put them inside his jacket. He reached above his head for the two energy rifles.

"I will tell you all about it," Gemma said. "But first you must come with me into the mines. You and all the Cotabote. We will be safe there."

"Safe? In the mines? With Devil? He will try to vile us all."

"That's it," Pat said. "We're going. If the Cotabote don't want to go down in the mines, they can stay here and make friends with the berserker. They should get along great."

"You go on if you have to," Gemma said. "I'm not leaving until I've explained this to the Cotabote."

"Explained it? You can't explain anything to them. All they care about is whether I put my filthy hands on

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you." The output spit out another independent and clicked off. Retch made a move toward it, and Pat snatched it away. "For your information, I did put my filthy hands on her. And at the time" — he looked hard at Gemma — "*at the time* she seemed to like it. Now, of course, she has another version of the story." He grabbed up his energy rifle and started down the steps. "I'll be at the wormhole by the river if you change your mind," he said, and walked out of the clearing.

Before he was even halfway to the wormhole, he knew he should never have left her. He should have slung her over his shoulder like the filthy viler the Cotabote thought he was, and carried her off with him. The Cotabote would all have followed him then, just to watch.

He almost turned around. Instead he stopped, and hooked up a self-contained to the terminal. "Do you see anything entering the atmosphere?" he asked.

"No."

A single self-contained limited the computer to straight yes-or-no answers, but that should be enough until he got to the wormhole. "Tell me if any object enters the atmosphere from now on," he said, stuffing the terminal back in his jacket. That should give him some warning so he could go back and get Gemma if the berserker tried to land an android. He hadn't even bothered to have the computer check for poison gases or viruses. If the beserker was going to destroy the whole planet, he'd rather die without knowing what he'd done to Gemma.

The wormhole had a heap of thorny nematej branches in front of it, offerings the Cotabote had left for the worm, who they were convinced would come plowing up out of the earth and eat them alive, no matter how many times Pat told them he wouldn't let that happen. Since when have they ever believed anything I told them? he thought bitterly, and kicked the thorns out of the way.

"Open the door," he said loudly. The massive metal door slid up. Exxon called the worm-built barriers fire doors and in official documents said that they were constructed throughout the mines and at all surface contact points to prevent the spread of underground coal fires, but Pat knew perfectly well what they were for. Exxon had given him atomic guns and two energy rifles to fight off diamond thieves with, but if he didn't succeed, he could always close the door and at least the diamonds would be safe, even from a berserker. Which was a comfort right now, or would be if Gemma were here.

Pat unslung his pack and set up the terminal just inside the door. He switched on the inspection lights, but left the door open. He asked again, "Do you see any objects entering the atmosphere now?"

"No," the computer said.

"Good." He finished hooking up the self-contained, lining it up along

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one of the oxygen tubes that ran the length of the worm trail.

"Have any objects entered the atmosphere?" he asked again, now that he could get a more complex answer.

"Not since your harpy reentered the atmosphere. At that time an object entered the atmosphere on a slow-descent path that terminated in—"

"What kind of object?"

"A ship somewhat like yours, although it converts to a ground vehicle. It has a mass of—"

"Where is it now?"

"I'll show you," the computer said, and flashed a local-area diagram on its screen with a blip right in the center of the Cotabote's main smash field.

"What's it doing now?"

"There are no signs of activity from this ship, but I am picking up atmospheric pollution in the area, with a chemical content of . . ." It paused while it did a chemical reading. Pat didn't wait to hear it.

"Shut the door!" he shouted, grabbing up his energy rifle, and tore up out of the wormhole.

He could see the smoke from the smash field even before he got to the office clearing. You hope it's smoke, he thought, and not some kind of poison.

He tore up the steps and opened the door to the office to get a mine mask. A blast of smoke hit him full in the face. His first thought was that the office was on fire. His second was that it wasn't poison gas, since he was still alive after a lungful — although if it got much thicker, he wouldn't be able to breathe. He could hardly see.

He clamped his mine mask on and adjusted the eyeshields to screen out the smoke so he could see. The office wasn't on fire. The smoke was coming in the open window from the smash field. He could see the flames from here. The fire was moving in the direction of the Cotabote village. A straggling line of Cotabote were heading past the office, carrying sacks over their shoulders.

He grabbed the spare mine mask and ran back down the steps and across to them. "Go to the wormhole by the river," he said. "I'll meet you there. Where's Gemma?"

They went past him as if he weren't there, their shirttails pulled up over their noses. The last two in the group were Rutchirrah and Scamballah, with their three daughters clinging to them and bawling.

"Where's Gemma?" Pat said.

"I told you he wasn't down in the mines at all," Scumbag said triumphantly. "It was all a trick so he could set fire to our fields."

"We will file a protest!" Rutchirrah said.

Pat took hold of both his spongy arms and shook him. "You tell me where she is or I'll throttle you. *Where is Gemma?*"

"Attempted murder!" Retch

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squawled. "Exxon will hear of this!"

Pat couldn't waste any more time on them. He ran off toward the village through periodic lines of Cotabote, all of them coughing and crying from an acrid smell like burning chicken feathers, but none of them willing to put down their sacks. There was no way he could get to the village itself. Its houses were completely on fire, their nematej-thatched roofs crackling and falling in on the clay huts. The coal fence around the village was burning, too, a ret-hot line roiling with yellow smoke.

"Gemma!" he shouted. "Gemma!"

The huge smash field was burning, too, but without so much smoke, and he could see a squat black shape far out in the center of it, crouched there like a spider, with smaller shapes in front of it that he hoped to God weren't bodies. It was definitely a berserker lander. He hoped the shapes in front of it weren't berserker androids, either. At least they weren't moving.

Just then he saw another shape moving toward the lander, more than halfway to it. The shape was picking its way slowly through one of the fermentation ditches.

"Gemma!" Pat shouted. The figure turned and then started slowly forward again. He ran toward her, vaulting over the clumps of burning smash to get to the ditch she was in. There was still water in the bottom of the ditch, but it was not even through his boots. He splashed up to where Gemma was standing coughing, her wet shirttail up over her mouth.

"What in the hell are you doing out here?" he said, pulling the shirt away and shoving the mask down over her face. "That's a berserker lander."

Gemma had been farther out than he thought. The lander wasn't more than fifty meters away. "Get down," he said, pulling her down beside him in the foul-smelling ditch.

"I know," she tried to say, still coughing. "The Cotabote . . ."

"Did they start this fire? Has the lander been firing lasers at them?"

"No," she said. She wasn't coughing, but her voice still sounded hoarse. "The lander hasn't done anything. I started the fire."

"You? Why in the hell did you do that? Did you think the lander would start coughing or what?"

"I did the only thing I could think to do. *You* weren't around to ask!" She stood up. "We've got to go out there and get . . ."

There was a flash of red light and a cracking sound, and the shapes in front of the lander burst into flame.

"I thought you said it wasn't doing anything," Pat said. "That's a laser! I don't care what you wanted to go get. We're going!" He grabbed her hand. Gemma didn't resist. They ran, crouching along the ditch to the end of the field, and went down behind the dike edging the field. The lander

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continued firing. Pat unslung his rifle and fired several more blasts that seemed to have no effect whatsoever. The lander didn't return his fire. Instead it made a grinding noise and began rolling toward them.

Pat glanced around. There weren't any Cotabote in sight, which was good. Gemma would probably have insisted on explaining things to them. The wind had veered and the fire was moving off to the other side of the village, which meant the office and the harpy would be safe provided the lander didn't blast them. "Let's go," Pat said, fired a couple more blasts, and ran, using the ridge for cover, along the village side of the ridge to a large nematej thicket that wasn't on fire yet.

"What are you doing?" Gemma said. "You're going the wrong way."

"We've got to lead it away from the harpy. We'll cut through the thicket and then back along the river to the wormhole. It's not coming very fast. We can outrun it."

The lander had gotten stuck in one of the ditches. Pat fired several more blasts to make sure it hadn't forgotten where they were, and then crashed into the thicket. It was a stupid move. Gemma got hung up on an overhanging branch, and Pat had to tear a long section of her blouse to get her loose. They both got thoroughly scratched in the process.

The river was not much better. Smoke from the fire had gathered along the riverbank so that even their eyeshields couldn't see through the smoke. And the lander was steadily gaining on them. It apparently had rolled right through the thicket. They splashed out of the river and into the wormhole clearing.

"Open the door," Pat shouted when they were still a hundred meters away. A dozen Cotabote were clustered around the door. When it clanged open, they backed away from it, dropping their sackfuls of belongings.

Get inside!" Pat yelled, and turned around. He went down on one knee to try to get one of the lander's treads as it came out of the woods.

Gemma was trying to herd the Cotabote through the door and down the dark wormtrail, but they insisted on taking their bundles, even though the lander was practically on top of them.

"Are they all in?" Pat shouted to Gemma. The lander rolled into the clearing.

"Yes! No! Scamballah, get in here! Run, Pat!" she yelled. He leaped for the door, shouting, "Get down, Gemma!" and then, belatedly, "Shut the door!"

He flattened himself against the wall, dragging Gemma with him. The door clanged down, and he stood there, still holding Gemma against him, listening. He could hear faint pings, which meant the lander was firing its laser. He pulled his mask off

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with his free hand. The Cotabote were watching him, looking belligerent.

"I think the door will hold," Pat said to Gemma, "but it can't hurt to put a few more fire doors between it and us. You can take your mask off now."

Gemma pulled her mask off over her head. In the dim light she looked frightened and in somewhat of a shock. There were gray streaks of ash on her dark cheeks.

"It's O.K.," he said, turning her to face him. "It's right where we want it. It didn't find the lander, and it can't get through that door. Exxon's seen to that. And if you'll give me a few minutes, I'll come up with a plan to blast it right off Botea."

She looked paler and even more frightened when he said that. The lander must have really spooked her. He pulled her close and patted her clumsily on the back. "It's O.K., sweetheart."

"I knew it," Scumbag said. "Viling her right in front of us. Which of us will be his next victim?"

Gemma backed out of Pat's arms. "Scamballah," she said, picking up the lantern and the smash sack full of self-contained. "Pat wants us to go deeper in the mine. You will do what he says or I will send you back outside." Pat had never seen a direct threat work on the Cotabote before, but this one did. Scumbag shuffled back with the others and cleared a path for Pat.

He switched on the light on his mine mask and handed it to Gemma by the straps. "Let's go."

"I will file a protest about this," Scamballah said.

"You do that," Gemma said, and started down the wormtrail.

By the second fire door, Pat had decided he'd rather face the berserker than put up with the Cotabote any longer. Scumbag's youngest daughter had tripped over a loose piece of coal and set up a wail that echoed off the walls, and Retch and Scumbag had threatened him with at least thirteen protests.

He closed the door and said, "This is far enough. Give me some room so I can set up the computer." He set it up on a ventilator ridge and asked for a map of their location. "There's a worm intersection a little farther on. Take the Cotabote down to it, Gemma, and then come back. I'm going to need you."

"All right," Gemma said, and herded them off down the passageway. While she was gone he did a surface survey and then fed in all the independents. The lander was still parked right outside the mine, though it had stopped firing its laser. Pat hoped that didn't mean it was getting set to try something new. The fire had burned itself out. The harpy was still in one piece, and so was the office. So

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vas the berserker, but it would be on he other side of Botea for another hree hours, and it hadn't sent anyhing else down.

"What can you tell me about the ander?" he asked the computer.

"It matches the description of a erserker lander on Polara," the comuter said instantly. "Planet defense lestroyed three androids and did sigificant damage to the berserker, but o damage to the lander, which is nade of a titanium alloy." The comuter put up a tech-diagram of the ander. It was definitely the thing utside the door. "The lander doesn't ave an electronuclear brain of its wn like the androids. It gets its comnands from the orbiting berserker."

"The berserker probably holed up ut there to make itself some new ndroids, and we caught it by surrise," Pat said.

"The Polara data show that the ander can be destroyed with a direct verhead drop of a 2-T exploder on he midsection area shown." The omputer flashed a blip in the middle f the diagram, right over the transnitter from which the lander must get ts instructions.

"If they knew how to destroy it, vhy didn't they?" Pat said, and then vished he hadn't. He was afraid he new the answer. All the settlement olony's big ships up fighting the bererker while the people on the ground truggled to stop three androids, and he lander did what? A virus? A gas?

"Switch us to internal oxygen," Pat said. "Ventilate from . . ." From where? The berserker was on the other side of the planet, but it could be starting its attack over there, on the nematej and wild smash. "Ventilate from Surface Contact Point Ten, but check to make sure the air's all right first, and keep monitoring it. Show me that diagram again."

"I put the Cotabote in the intersection," Gemma said.

"Good," Pat said. "I found out why that lander's so slow-witted. It's just supposed to be transport for berserker androids, only there aren't any. It gets its orders from the berserker, and its orders were probably to come down and take a look around, maybe take a couple of natives back home to study. I don't think it was prepared to do battle."

"Then why did it start firing at us?"

"I don't know, Gemma, maybe it considered setting fire to it a hostile act. Maybe it took one look at the Cotabote and decided on its own to wipe them all out. Whichever it is, we're going back outside." He pointed to the screen. "We're going down past the intersection to this trail and then up to the surface this way. That'll bring us up a kilometer and a half from the harpy."

"Harpy?" Gemma said faintly.

"Yeah," he said. He unhooked the transmitter from the voice terminal and put it in his pocket. "We're going

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to take the harpy up and blow that lander's brains out before it gets any more orders from upstairs."

"No, we're not," Gemma said, sounding angry.

Pat turned around. "I suppose you have a better idea."

"No," she said. She didn't look angry. She looked scared to death. "I don't have any ideas at all."

"Well, then, suppose we try mine. Or would you rather stay here and file protests for the Cotabote?"

"We can't go up in the harpy, Pat," she said. "The Cotabote took the command core. They gave it to the lander."

Pat stood up. "That's what you were trying to get back."

"Yes," she said, backing away from him a little as if she thought he was going to hit her. "I started the fire, but it didn't do any good. They took it out to the lander, anyway."

"And the lander blew it up. Why didn't you tell me? Scratch that. You did the best you could. I should never have left the command core in the harpy. It's going to kill us. You know that, don't you?"

She had backed right into the wall of coal. "Yes, I know."

Pat hunched down in front of the computer and stared at it. "It . . . I don't know. Maybe if we go as deep as we can, close all the fire doors behind us, we can hold out till we get a message through to Candlestone."

She came away from the wall and looked at the terminal screen. "What about the orbital atomic?"

"Are you kidding? It'd take four times the firepower of the atomic to even make a dent in a berserker, even if we knew where to hit it."

"I meant the lander," she said. She leaned over his shoulder, looking at the diagram of the lander.

"An atomic would blow us up, too. If it could be fired at Botea. Which it can't. Gemma, there's nothing we can do without the harpy."

She was still looking at the screen. "What about the worms?" she said.

"The worms?"

"Yeah. This diagram shows a hit from above, but the transmission core goes all the way through the middle of the lander. Why couldn't a hit come from underneath? We could put a 2-T exploder on a worm and have it burrow up under the lander. Couldn't we?"

He stood up. "Where's the nearest worm?" he asked the computer.

The computer flashed a map of the mine with a double blip showing the nearest worm. It was in the trail beneath them, only a few hundred meters from the intersection. "Hold it there," Pat said. "Does it have exploders?"

"Yes," the computer said. "Nineteen of them."

"Nineteen," Pat said. "Gemma, you're terrific."

"I've assimilated the Polara data and the pictures of berserker damage,

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and I have a possible plan of attack," the computer said. "A ship with a directional blinder and c-plus cannon can get through the berserker's protective force field to the brain."

"Yeah, well, we don't have a blinder. Or a cannon. Thanks, anyway." He handed Gemma the two mine masks and took down a hydrogen fusion lantern from the trail wall. "Come on, Gemma." She followed him, but over the transmitter she asked the computer to explain the entire plan step-by-step, and then asked for it again.

The computer walked them through the rough wormtrails to the point where the worm was supposed to be. For a while it had looked like the Cotabote were coming with them, until Gemma said coldly, "Stay in the side tunnel or I will have Pat send the worm to eat you." They were so surprised they had not even threatened to file a protest. Instead, Retch had asked meekly if they could have the lantern. Gemma had given them one of the mine masks.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Pat asked now. He couldn't see any sign of the intersecting wormtrail that was supposed to be here. "I don't see any trail," he said, and practically fell into it. It went straight down, a rough-hewn hole right in the middle of the trail. When he shone the lantern into it, he could see the bottom, but no worm.

He eased himself into the hole until he had found a foothold on the side, with Gemma holding the lantern, and then took it from her so she could come down to stand beside him on the heap of black rubble.

"It looks like there's been a rockfall," Gemma said. "How do we get past it?"

"We don't," Pat said. "I think this is the worm." He knelt down and began clearing the chunks of yellow coal away. Under it was the smooth gray of the worm's grinding head. "See?" he said.

"Where are the exploders?" she said.

"Inside the mouth. We won't be able to get at them, but the controls should be right here, at the back of its head." He swept away more rubble to reveal a beveled rectangle, and flipped up the control plate. "When the worm's digging a new trail, it spits out an exploder, backs up to a safe distance, and detonates it. I'm going to change the sequencing to bypass that ejection. When the first 2-T explodes, it should set off the other eighteen. Give me the coordinates for the lander."

He handed her the transmitter, and she said, "Tell us where the lander is," and then held it up to Pat's ear so he could type in the coordinates.

"O.K," he said, straightening up. "I've got it set to come up under the lander and detonate. I've sent it down already-existing trails till the last hundred meters so it can go at maxi-

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mum speed. For that last stretch I put its grinders on full, and we hope it doesn't burn itself out before it gets to the surface. So our only problem is going to be" — he put his hands on Gemma's waist and lifted her up to the first foothold — "getting out of the way. Because exactly thirty seconds after I put it in drive, it's going to come up out of this hole whether we're in it or not."

She was out of the hole. He handed her up the lantern and got a good grip on the foothold. He stooped quickly and touched the start key, and then jumped for the foothold. Gemma set the lantern down and reached over the edge to give him a hand.

The worm gave a low growl and shudder and reared its gray metal head clear of the coal rubble. Pat swung up into the second foothold and almost lost his footing. Gemma's hand caught his arm and hauled him up over the edge of the tunnel.

"Come on," she said, trying to pull him to his feet. He scrambled up. "It's coming," she yelled, and bent down to get the lantern.

"There's no time for that!" he shouted, and pushed her around the corner of the tunnel and up against the wall.

The worm gave a deafening growl and then roared suddenly away down the far trail. The tunnel was silent for a moment, and then there was a loose clatter of rocks as the coal the worm had dislodged in its passing rolled down into the hole. The tunnel went suddenly dark.

"There goes the lantern," Gemma said. "I thought you said we had thirty seconds."

Pat let go of her. "I thought you'd have enough sense to hang onto the lantern, no matter how much time we had."

He shouldn't have let go of her. In the pitch-blackness he had no idea where she was. He took a cautious step forward into the tunnel and nearly pitched into another hole. He backed up against the wall and slid down to a sitting position. "You might as well sit down and relax," he said, patting the floor beside him. "We're going to be here awhile."

"You can sit here if you want," she said, and stepped on his hand. "I'm going back and make sure the Cotabote are all right. They probably think the worm is coming to eat them."

She stepped forward off his hand and went sprawling across his knees. He groped to help her up, got her knee and then her arm. "Exactly how far do you think you'll get without a light?" he said angrily. "You'll fall down that wormhole we just came up. Or worse. We're staying right here."

"The Cotabote . . ."

"The Cotabote can take care of themselves. I'd bet on the Cotabote against a berserker any day," he said,

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still holding onto her arm. "We're staying right here until the worm blows up that lander."

She didn't say anything, but her arm stiffened under his grip.

"Sit down," he said, and pulled her down beside him. "Do you still have the transmitter?"

"Yes,'" she said coldly. "If you'll let go of me, I'll get it out of my pocket."

He could hear her fumbling with it. "Here it is," she said, and hit him in the nose with it.

"Thanks," he said.

"I didn't mean to do that," she said. "I can't see you."

He got hold of her hand and took the transmitter from her. "Where's the worm?" he said.

"It's just exiting the intersection and is starting up the main tunnel," the computer said.

"Good," Pat siad. "Tell me when it starts the new tunnel."

After a minute, the computer said, "It's starting the tunnel."

"Can you give me an estimate of how long it'll take to get to the surface?"

"Eight to twelve mintues," the computer said.

"Tell me when it's ten meters from the surface," Pat said. He put the transmitter in his pocket and brushed against Gemma's hand. He held onto it. "I just don't want you hitting me in the nose again," he said. "In another ten minutes we should have plenty of light to travel by."

"Pat," she said. "I'm sorry I lost the lantern." She sounded a little shaky.

"Hey, you can't kid me!" he said lightly. "I know you dropped that lantern on purpose just so you could be alone in the dark with me."

"I did not," she said indignantly, and Pat expected her to pull her hand away, but she didn't.

"Come on," he said, "you've been dying to get me alone like this. Admit it. You're crazy about me."

"I admit it," she said, and now her voice didn't sound shaky at all. "I'm crazy about you."

What had ever given him the idea he couldn't find her in the dark? There were no false tries. He didn't hit her in the nose. He hardly had to move at all, and there he was, kissing her.

"The worm is ten meters from the surface," the computer said from Pat's pocket after what had to have been eight to ten minutes, but didn't feel like that long. "Nine point five meters, nine point—"

"I knew it," Scumbag said, pointing the mine mask at them. "I told Rutchirrah there wasn't a berserker, that this was all a trick so you could—"

There was a low, clanging sound from a long way off. Gemma shielded her eyes from the light. "What's that noise? It sounded like—"

"I know what it sounds like," Pat

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said. He yanked the transmitter out of his pocket.

"Seven point five," the computer said.

"What's that noise?" he shouted into the terminal.

"We know you were lying to us, trying to trap us underground so the worms could eat us, and you could steal Gemenca and vile her," Scumbag said.

"What did you do?" Gemma said.

"We will file a protest as soon as we go back to our village. Come, Gemenca." She grabbed for Gemma's hand with her spongy one. "We are going now. Rutchirrah has opened the doors."

"Shut the doors!" Pat shouted. "Shut the doors!"

"The doors won't respond to your transmitted voice," the computer said. "There's too much distortion."

"You have to tell Rutchirrah to shut the doors right now," Gemma said to Scumbag. "The lander will get in."

"Has it moved?" Pat said.

"Yes. It's in the main tunnel," the computer said.

"You've got to shut the fire doors before it gets any further. Simulate my voice."

There was a pause. The computer said, in Pat's voice, "Shut the doors," and the lights came on.

The flash of light blinded Pat. He grabbed wildly for Gemma and pulled her down underneath him, expecting another rockfall. It didn't come, and the light faded and went out.

"Attempted murder," Scumbag wailed from several meters away.

Pat had dropped the transmitter when he hit the floor. "Are you there?" he shouted. "Where's the lander? Did the doors shut?" There wasn't any answer. Of course not. With the fire door open, the only thing that had blown up was the computer. The lander was probably halfway here by now.

He rolled off Gemma. "Are you O.K.," he said, surprised that he could almost see her.

She sat up and looked down the tunnel. "Where's that light coming from?" she said.

It was too steady for a laser, too bright to be the Cotabote coming with the other mine mask to accuse him of viling Gemma. The light had a faint reddish cast to it. Pat leaned back against the wall and shut his eyes. "The mine's on fire," he said.

Gemma reached forward and picked up the transmitter. "Are you there?" she said into it. "Are you still there?"

"It's no use," Pat said. "The worm blew the computer up."

"Do you read me?" a voice said. "Where are you? Identify yourselves."

"I'm Gemenca Bahazai, ICLU representative," she said. "We're down in the coal mines. Do you copy?"

"We copy," the voice said. "This

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is Buzz Jameson. Did you know you've got a berserker up here, sweetheart?"

"Yes!" Pat said, but Gemma wouldn't let go of the transmitter. "Do you have a directional blinder? And c-plus cannon?"

"We got anything you want, honey. I've got half of Exxon's navy up here. You just tell us what to do, and we'll blow this berserker and then come down there to get you, sweetheart."

"Well, it's about time," Scamballah said. "I thought Exxon would never respond to our protests."

They walked out of the mine. Jameson had said, after what seemed like hours, "We got him. Stay put. We'll be down to get you in just a few minutes," but Pat wasn't sure they had a few minutes. The orange light from the direction of the main tunnel was getting steadily brighter, and Pat could smell smoke.

There was plenty of light to see by, and both Gemma and Pat had a general idea of where they were from the mine maps they'd studied. "We're walking out," he told Jameson over the transmitter. "Get the Cotabote to show you the surface contact point that's near the smash stills."

After the first bend in the tunnel, they had to turn the mine mask back on to see by. Pat sent Scumbag ahead of them, holding the mask up like a lantern, in hope that it would shut her up. It didn't.

"You want me to go first so you can push me in a hole," she said.

"It's a thought," Pat said. "Look on the bright side," he said to Gemma. "Maybe she's the only one who survived."

"Jameson's Exxon's troubleshooter," Gemma said. "I read about him. Why is he here?

"Probably to destroy the berserker," Pat said. "Not that Exxon cares about us, but they've got to protect their diamond mines."

The fire door to the outside was shut. "Open the door," Scamballah said in Pat's voice. The door slid slowly up.

"So that's how you got the door open, you slimy toadstool, I oughta—"

"You heard that," Scamballah said. "He threatened me."

Pat blinked in the sunlight. The clearing was full of Cotabote and what seemed like dozens of men and women in flight coats and helmets. Jameson hadn't been kidding. He had brought half of Exxon's navy with him.

"Don't just stand there," Retch said. "He set fire to our smash fields, he blew up our mine, and he tried to kill us. Arrest him." Retch was talking to a large redheaded man with an acceleration helmet under his arm. Jameson.

"Boy, are we glad to see you," Pat said, and held out his hand to shake it.

Jameson looked uncomfortable.

"These idiots opened the fire

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doors and let a berserker lander into the mine. If you hadn't come along when you did, we'd have been done for."

"Are you Patrick Devlin?"

"Yes," said Pat.

"You're under arrest."

Jameson locked Pat in his office, looking thoroughly ashamed of himself, and went off to negotiate with the Cotabote. When he came back, he didn't look ashamed. He was furious.

"I told you you couldn't tell them anything," Pat said.

"You're being removed. We're taking you off Botea tomorrow morning."

"I'm not leaving without Gemma."

"You're hardly in a position to make demands," Jameson said. "Even assuming that Gemma wanted to go with you."

"What's that supposed to mean? Of course she wants to go with me. The Cotabote tried to kill us both. If you hadn't come along . . ."

"Yes, apparently it was a good thing I came along when I did." He stood up. "The charges against you are destruction of private property, attempted murder, sexual assault—"

"Sexual assault? You don't believe that, do you? Ask Gemma. She'll tell you."

"She did tell me," Jameson said. "She's the one who filed the charge. Failure to file protests, and refusal to cooperate."

"Gemma filed the charge?"

"Yes, and it's made the matter much more serious. The Cotabote originally demanded your removal; but in their culture sexual violence is considered the ultimate taboo."

"Oh, great. I suppose they want to hang me, and you're going to go right along with it. It's too bad you blew up the berserker. He was a nice guy compared to you and the Cotabote." And Gemma.

"You're not getting hanged," Jameson said, "though in my opinion you deserve to be. You're getting married."

Jameson took Pat to the Cotabote village under armed guard. It hadn't all burned. The clay houses were still standing. Gemma was standing outside a smash storage hut, dressed in a shapeless black sack and holding a bouquet of nematej thorns. She didn't look at him. Pat didn't look at her, either.

Jameson performed a ship captain's ceremony, glaring at Pat and smiling pityingly at Gemma. The second he was done, he slammed the book shut, and stuck a marriage certificate under their noses to sign. Gemma signed it without a word, waited until Pat had signed it, and then disappeared into the hut.

Scamballah shook her finger in Pat's face. "You will now be married in the Cotabote ceremony." She

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turned to Jameson and smiled sweetly at him. "We have put up a partition in the hut to make sure that Devil doesn't vile Gemenca during the ceremony."

The armed guard tossed him in the hut and locked the door. The hut smelled like burning chicken feathers. The partition was a sheet of thin black metal, wedged between the heavy sacks of drying smash and poking up through what was left of the roof.

"They put this partition so I wouldn't vile you," Pat said. "I suppose that was your idea."

Gemma didn't answer.

"Sexual assault, huh? I suppose you told them I started the fire, too. Nice touch. Why didn't you tell them I brought the berserker here, too, just to kill them?"

There was still no answer. He could hear Rutchirrah chanting something outside. He heard the words, "Devil" and "filthy viler."

"Well, don't worry," he said. "You can tell them after we're married." He went over to the partition and put his ear against it. He couldn't hear anything. The sound of chanting moved off till he couldn't hear it anymore. He could smell smoke. "Great. Now they're going to burn us alive. It's probably their favorite part of the ceremony."

Gemma obviously wasn't talking to him. Maybe she wasn't even on the other side of the metal partition. Maybe they'd put Scumbag in there instead, and she was going to burst through it and stick her finger in his face. He tried to lift the partition, but it was heavier than he'd thought. He wondered where the Cotabote had gotten it. It could be part of the worm that had blown up, although the worm's metal was light gray and this was almost black.

"I knew it!" he shouted. "They've taken apart the lander. They'll be using the berserker for lamps next. Why did I think they needed saving? We should have sent them out to save us!"

"They did save us," Gemma said. Her voice, distorted by the metal, had a bell-like quality. "They sent for Jameson."

"Oh, they did, huh? Would you mind telling me how they managed to get a message to Exxon in twenty minutes flat?"

"They didn't," she said. "They sent it three weeks ago. I told you there was an extra protest. They copied your voice access and filed a protest of their own."

He could hear Gemma's voice clearly through the metal, so there was really no need to yell, but he yelled anyway. "What makes you think Exxon would come running over one protest when they never paid any attention to the ones you filed?"

"I never sent the ones I filed," she said.

The metal partition didn't weigh

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anything. He heaved it over onto the smash sacks in the corner and looked at Gemma. She was plucking the thorns out of her bouquet.

"Why didn't you file the protests?" he said.

"Jameson's got a plan for getting us out of here," she said to her bouquet. "The Cotabote contract expressly forbids any legal contracts to be negotiated between ICLU reps and Exxon people. Conflict of interest."

"And a marriage certificate is a legal document. What's he going to do? Haul us both back to Exxon for trial?"

"No. He's going to accuse Rutchirrah of trying to get out of the contract. He's going to say the Cotabote conspired to the marriage by insisting on my going on the orbital survey with you. Which they did. He'll tell them Exxon wants out of the contract, that it's going to close down the diamond mines. Rutchirrah will take the opposite side and insist they don't want out of the contract. Jameson will say the only way Exxon will agree to it is if the ICLU rep and the Exxon engineeer are taken back to Earth to have their marriage annulled."

"So Jameson came up with this plan all by himself, huh?"

She plucked at a thorny flower. "Well, not exactly. I mean, I told him how you got the Cotabote to do what you wanted, and then we came up with the plan together."

"Whose idea was it that we get married?" he said.

She had cut herself on a thorn. She watched her finger bleed. "Mine," she said.

"Why didn't you sent the protests?"

"Because I was afraid they'd have you removed," she said, and finally looked up at him. "I didn't want you to go."

"I don't care what Jameson says, we're not getting this marriage annulled."

"I told you he couldn't keep his filthy hands off her," Retch said from above them. He was leaning over the edge of the charred roof looking down on them.

"Is that why you left them in here together?" Jameson said from the doorway. "Is that why you sent her on the orbital survey with him? Because you knew what would happen?"

Gemma insisted Pat go talk to his replacement before they left. "I intend to tell mine a thing or two about how to handle the Cotabote. It's not fair to just let her walk into this without at least warning her about them. I feel sorry for her. Jameson just picked her because she's an engineer."

The replacement was in Pat's office, glaring at the terminal screen of the computer. When they came in, she stood up and put her hands on her hips. She had pale, spongy-looking skin and lank hair. "I suppose you're responsible for this computer

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calling me 'sweetheart,' " she said, and stuck her finger in his face. "I consider that sexual harrassment of the lowest sort. I intend to file a protest." She sat back down at the voice terminal.

"Why don't you just do that?" Gemma said. She reached across her and typed in an access code. "This is the transmission program I always used for filing my protests. I'm sure you'll find you get good results with it.'

"I'm perfectly capable of writing my own transmission programs," she said.

Gemma reached across her again and erased the code from the screen. "Fine," she said. "Don't use it. Come on, Pat, we don't want to miss our ship."

Pat turned at the door. "You're going to love it here, honey," he said, and blew her a kiss.

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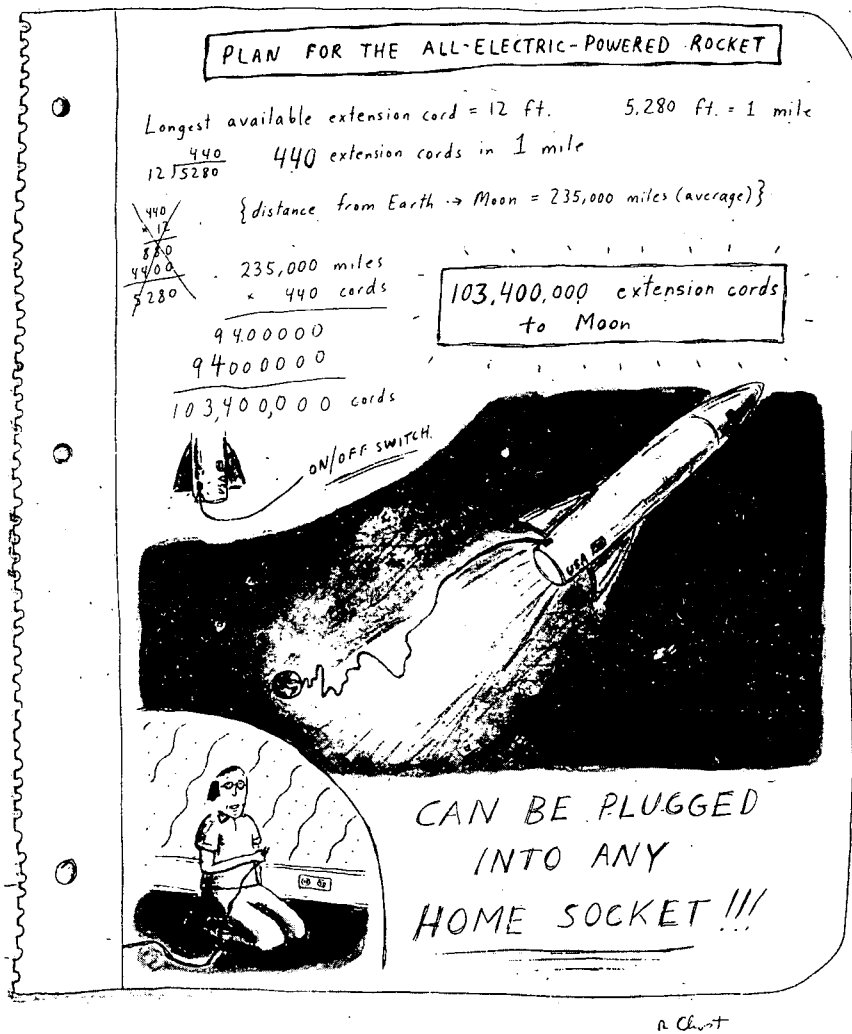
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{distance from Earth → Moon = 235,000 miles (average)}
235,000 miles
× 440 cords
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94000000
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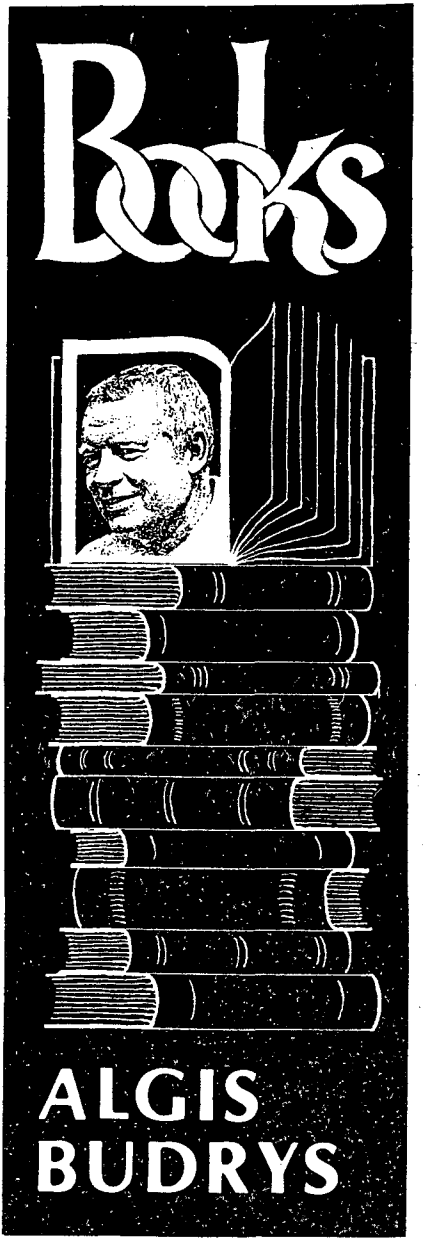

The Paradox Men, Charles L. Harness. Crown, $8.95

Castle Crespin, Allen Andrews. Tor, $2.95

Castles, Alan Lee. Bantam hardcover, $24.95

and various mentions in passing

In a society crazily combining elements of every known political system but usually ruled by an emperor or imperatrix, an almost open and nearly institutionalized underground fights authority to the death. Somewhere near the center of action, too, is a twentieth-century social philosophy whose central tenets are about to be put to the crucial test by the events we can feel grinding to a climax in this future world. Caught in the exact middle is an uninformed protagonist, usually amnesiac, who continually discovers fresh super-powers within himself. He does this in response to the fact that he is unrelentingly under attack on all sides by enemies who want to appropriate his powers and friends who want to channel them, none of whom ever tell him the truth even though they know all or most of it. In the end, he transforms the entire society. Sometimes, he does this by transforming the entire universe. None of what happens makes any logical sense as soon as you step back and look at it, and the scientific assertions blandly quoted at each other by the characters are ludicrous. This latter feature is appar-

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ently crucial, because it appears in this mode even when written by Charles L. Harness, a patent attorney.

It is a thing which is apparently completely nonliterary in any usual sense: the ability to write SF in the mode of A.E. van Vogt invariably, of Philip K. Dick and Damon Knight when the whim is on them, and of Charles L. Harness. I defy you to take any of the books I mean, obliterate all traces of byline, and be able to have a neutral observer detect they were not all written by the same maniac.

I don't suppose I really mean "nonliterary." Obviously, there is narrative power in them. I probably mean "paraliterary." I probably mean, in fact, that raw, red, relentless hammering of one-liner and double-take which, once upon a time, I detected in the successes of the van Vogts and played with to use in aid of a project of mine ultimately called *Rogue Moon.* I detected it, but not with the intellect. It doesn't work on the intellect, and hence can barely be named.

Van Vogt himself, who apparently invented it and claims he dreams it, "explained" it long ago in a book called *Worlds Beyond,* in which various top SF authors of the 1940s spoke of how they wrote. He explained in terms of scene-blocking; he wrote in short scenes, he said, injecting a new idea every few hundred words, like clockwork. Thus he created such masterpieces as *Slan* — a now rarely cited superman novel which, in the 1940s, was considered fully the equal of, for example, Olaf Stapledon's *Odd John* — and such successes *de scandale* as *World of A,* the book for which he's usually remembered now.*

Based on that revelation, and on sharp-eyed further study, skilled professionals like Damon Knight and Philip K. Dick were able to produce work that was very much like van Vogt's. Dick's *Solar Lottery* and *The World Jones Made* appeared in the mid-1950s; Knight's *Beyond the Barrier* came out in 1964, but followed on his close nonfiction studies of the mode that began with a 1940s fanzine essay on van Vogt and included an adulatory, and analytical, review of Harness's *The Paradox Men* in the early 1950s.†

What we're talking here is the purest sort of Post-Modernism, typical of the period of SF history when fresh hands in the 1950s and early 1960s assimulated and recast the material developed by Modern Science Fiction (1938-1950). The spate of creativity, not to say ikon-breaking, led by John W. Campbell, Jr. as editor of *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine, had as one effect brought forth van Vogt. So striking was he that one Post-Modern-

**It's odd to speak of him as if he were no longer working. He is still producing steadily.*

†*See any edition of Knight's essay/review collection,* In Search of Wonder.

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ist after another had to tackle him in some way or not rest. Besides such overt examples as the Knight and the Dick books, and such transmogrifications as *Rogue Moon,* there are deep van Vogtian footprints all over James Blish's "Cities in Flight" series, for instance, and there are funny little echoes in Keith Laumer that I think would not have been there.

But the strangest, and the aptest, of these was Charles L. Harness. Still is.

Let's look at this, now. In terms of the stated ideal of Modern Science Fiction — widely advertised to have been the voice of technophilia, published in a periodical whose editor and readers took great delight in picking at scientific flaws — van Vogt is a total aberration. He simply — like L. Ron Hubbard — does not fit in that party-line description of the genre; most of the science he knows is blatant pseudoscience and the rest is wrong. Furthermore, he has a very dicey understanding of applied science; he is consistent in treating it just as if toasters were run by demons, and he is consistent in few other respects of it.

Too, unlike most of the other major new writers Campbell found — Heinlein, Clement, DeCamp, del Rey, Asimov — van Vogt had no ties to formal or informal science or engineering. He was a reformed confession-romance writer (as Hubbard was a pulp adventure wordsmith). And precisely at the time when Modern SF was at its height, so was van Vogt; it was Knight, not Campbell's readers, who brought him down.

Now, in 1949, *Startling Stories* published a "complete novel" called *Flight Into Yesterday,* by somebody named Charles Harness who had published a piece or two in *Astounding.* That became a freestanding full-length book in 1953, retitled *The Paradox Men* in 1955, and what Crown has published for us now is yet another drafting. The present edition includes as well an excellent introduction by George Zebrowski and an appreciation by Brian Aldiss, the two endpieces reflecting the book's continuing status as a cult classic ... a feeling set in motion, I believe, by Knight's original review.

Harness, you see, was not a skilled professional — though he certainly wrote about as well as any of his professional contemporaries. He appeared not to be doing van Vogt as an exercise, and he did not appear to regard him as a takeoff point for possibly useful further exploration. Rather, he seemed to be doing it because it came naturally to him — and indeed, if his newest novel, *Firebird* (1982), is any indication, it did and does.

Now, Harness cannot be a freak; recently retired, he has an impeccable career behind him as a rational, technologically trained, educated person. Furthermore, if testimony of

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such friends and acquaintances as Theodore L. Thomas is to be believed, he is a very likeable person without disabling indiosyncrasies.*

This argues among other things for the idea that van Vogt is not necessarily a crazy, either. Or else.... Or else, since this story apparently recurs to us as a community archetype, manifesting itself through various vessels at various times but always retaining its own essential lineaments.... Or else, since *The Paradox Men* is utter nonsense from start to finish — not always comprehensible nonsense, either — but is absolutely, flatly, compelling, almost impossible to forget, and a guaranteed remedy for sleepiness.... Or else we are all nuts, and this tale of Alar the Thief, his love Keiris, his enigmatic past and his destiny which bridges both past and future, while making no sense makes profound sense.

Less perfervidly, let me quickly mention that *The Paradox Men* is part of the second wave of Crown's reputedly quite successful Classics of Modern Science Fiction series created and edited by George Zebrowski.

Thomas, co-author of The Clone *and author, over the last four decades, of a score of major SF short stories, is also a patent attorney. He first gained SF notice by taking over the "Leonard Lockhart" byline in* Astounding *and carrying on a comic series Harness had started, about the wonderful world of patent law.*

The price of these uniform editions (They're jacketed hardbacks, but with a printing area suitable for direct imposition to paperback) has gone up a dollar, which still seems quite a bargain. The other three books are: *The Classic Philip José Farmer 1964-1973; The Forgotten Planet,* a striking Murray Leinster novel made from three novellas published between 1920 and 1953; and *Unearthly Neighbors,* a Chad Oliver novel. Haven't read the Oliver. The Leinster — in its present version — is about a future planet on which stranded spaceship-crash victims have to survive in an artificially seeded ecology, and I recall that when I first read its components it seemed to me that SF had no finer adventure writer than Leinster. The Farmer is Part Two of a collection edited by Martin Harry Greenberg, and contains a careful selection of stories demonstrating this major figure's effect on SF over the years, and vice-versa. The man is a maniac, thank God.

Castle Crespin is a sequel to *The Pig Plantagenet.* Run, do not walk, do not quibble.

Set in thirteenth-century Acquitaine, the second of Allen Andrews' fabulations (Are there by any chance more of these?) is, like the first, about talking animals, including people. The times are Medieval; government is capricious, the forests are dark and extensive, an honest individual, animal or man, must be on guard at all

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times, and yet there is loyalty, love, and charm, even though any fool can plainly see that shrewdness yields greater advantage.

This time, the ineluctable Adèle and her friends, the pig Plantagenet, the donkey Sobrin and the beagle Rupert, are caught in the toils of politics. It is perhaps fitting that matters were largely precipitated by the overweening pride of a superlative fox and the unsuperlative but somehow understandable owner of fowl. It also makes very good sense that Saint Francis of Asissi figures well in this narrative.

I cannot tell you more. I am not saving these two books for my grandchildren; I am saving them for myself.

And I have a codicil for you on this matter:

In reviewing *The Pig Plantagenet* some months ago, I mentioned that I knew nothing of Andrews, and went on to theorize about where a hitherto unheralded person might gain such a vastly impressive knowledge of history, of nature observed with the eye of an Audubon, and of the human heart.

Well, since then I have had a letter from Paul Bogrow, an F&SF reader who is also the CBS producer coincidentally making a cartoon version of *The Pig Plantagenet*. You know who Andrews is? Andrews, 71, ex-RAF sergeant and London *Sunday Pictorial* film critic, ultra-prolific author of nonfiction war books, company histories, a biography of George III, and a book known in the U.S. as *The Flying Machine* but in England as *Back to The Drawing Board,* a man whom we shall hereafter know as The English Polymath, is also the author of *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines,* and books which led to *Those Daring Young Men in Their Jaunty Jalopies* and *The Great Race*. And thank you, Paul Bogrow.

Castles does better for castles what *The High Kings* last year did very well for kings. That is, it is an Ian Ballantine project of the first rank, and no one with an amateur or professional interest in the area can afford not to become familiar with it. It is a magnificent source-book.

More important, I think, is the fact that this volume will enthrall you even though you have no rational reason for it.

It's noteworthy, first of all, that the byline is not that of the text writer — who is David Day — but of the artist. As designed and edited by David Larkin, this is a book whose half-enchanted text strikes first graphically, and whose wordage is an antiphon, spoken behind and around the musicks of Alan Lee's fantastically gifted and astonishingly executed art.

Roughly 8 1/2 x 11, with much color painting and drawing, the book is, as Bantam's publicity promises, a time-trip into the mileux of these magnificent, multivalent structures,

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from their beginnings. It covers not only the facts, in exact renderings graphic and textual, but also the legends and the awe-inspiring atmosphere created by these vast swoops and tumuli of masonry, situated to command, erected to overween.

This is a book *qua* book, and only respectful superlatives will do to describe it. And before we leave it, let it be said that for all Lee deserves the byline, Day has exactly the voice for his part of the performance.

Glancing at my watch, I see it's time to remind you about Chris Drumm. Please take down this address:

Chris Drumm
P.O. Box 445
Polk City, IA 50226

Chris is a book dealer somewhere out there among the rectangular states where no one ever goes. He is also the publisher of all sorts of useful pamphlets, which used to look as if they were trimmed with fingernail scissors and stitched together on something from the attic of Elias Howe, and sold for ridiculous sums like $2 or 1.25 or 75 cents, postpaid. The more recent ones look a little better, but still cost in that range, and no matter how they look, they're crammed with reliable data that he keeps updating just as if he cared about giving value for money.

He has checklists on the published appearances of Hal Clement, Mack Reynolds, Thomas M. Disch, me, Larry Niven and, now, James Gunn. He has a trove of poetry chapbooks, fiction collections and nonfiction — not previously collected and in some cases not previously published — by R.A. Lafferty, and that alone should perk up your ears. He has a John Sladek story. And what-all else.

He also has a catalog. You could write for it.

It seems almost futile to mention this, since the chance is the books are gone from the racks again by the time you read this. But in October Del Rey re-issued, in a burst, Leigh Brackett's *The Ginger Star, The Hounds of Skaith,* and *The Reavers of Skaith,* the last three Eric John Stark adventures. Simultaneously, they re-issued Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonflight, Dragonquest,* and *The White Dragon,* and brought out the first reprint of *Moreta: Dragonlady of Pern.*

I know how I feel about Brackett and how I feel about dragons, and similarly you know how you feel about them, which is that no one else's opinion matters. But considered as a concentrated dose of adventure SF as done by two of the acknowledged best, this is an outcry of magnificent proportions.

How can an admiration for so many different sorts of SF by so many different sorts of practitioners possibly be rationalized? I suppose I am

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crazy. I suppose we are all crazy. How can we fall for the blatant megalomania of the van Vogt story and not blush before the world? How can we then respire to the noble rhythms — there is no other word — the noble rhythms of what Andrews does, or what Lee, Day and Larkin show us we have done? How can we dance in the arms of Lafferty's mind and laugh with Sladek, thrill with Brackett, dream with McCaffrey? Why, we must be quite various, I suppose, coming in and going out through many doors simultaneously, like a Harness hero.

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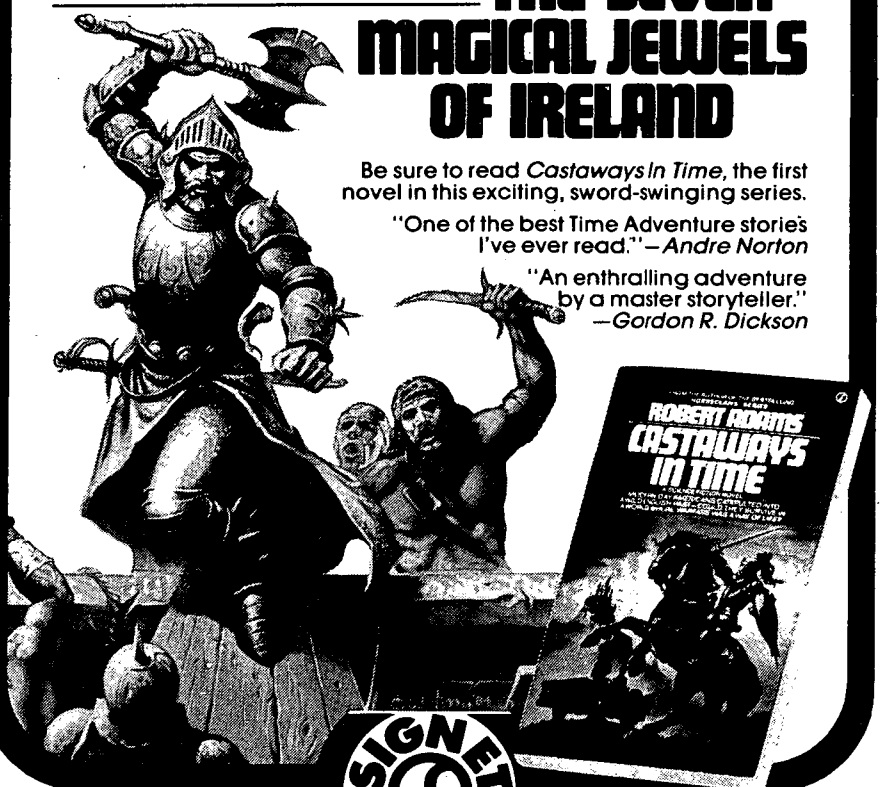

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SIGNET SCIENCE FICTION

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Jane Yolen, guest of honor at the 1984 World Fantasy Convention, returns with one of her superior fantasy tales — this one about a princess and three witches, whose lives have been sewn together by a queen's desire...

The Face in The Cloth

BY
JANE YOLEN

There was once a king and queen so in love with one another that they could not bear to be parted, even for a day. To seal their bond, they desperately wanted a child. The king had even made a cradle of oak for the babe with his own hands and placed it by their great canopied bed. But year in and year out, the cradle stood empty.

At last one night, when the king was fast asleep, the queen left their bed. She cast one long, lingering glance at her husband, then, disguising herself with a shawl around her head, she crept out of the castle, for the first time alone. She was bound for a nearby forest where she had heard that three witch-sisters lived. The queen had been told that they might give her what she most desired by taking from her what she least desired to give.

"But I have so much," she thought as she ran through the woods. "Gold and jewels beyond counting. Even the diamond that the king himself put on my hand and from which I would hate to be parted. But though it is probably what I would least desire to give, I would give it gladly to have a child."

The witches' hut squatted in the middle of the wood, and through its window the queen saw the three old sisters sitting by the fire, chanting a spell as soft as a cradle song:

Needle and scissors,
Scissors and pins,
Where one life ends,
Another begins.

And suiting their actions to the words, the three snipped and sewed, snipped and sewed with the invisible thread over and over and over again.

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The night was so dark and the three slouching sisters so strange that the queen was quite terrified. But her need was even greater than her fear. She scratched upon the window, and the three looked up from their work.

"Come in," they called out in a single voice.

So she had to go, pulled into the hut by that invisible thread.

"What do you want, my dear?" said the first old sister to the queen through the pins she held in her mouth.

"I want a child," said the queen.

"When do you want it?" asked the second sister, who held a needle high above her head.

"As soon as I can get it," said the queen, more boldly now.

"And what will you give for it?" asked the third, snipping her scissors ominously.

"Whatever is needed," replied the queen. Nervously she turned the ring with the diamond around her finger.

The three witches smiled at one another. Then they each held up a hand with the thumb and forefinger touching in a circle.

"Go," they said. "It is done. All we ask is to be at the birthing to sew the swaddling clothes."

The queen stood still as stone, a river of feeling washing around her. She had been prepared to gift them a fortune. What they asked was so simple, she agreed at once. Then she turned and ran out of the hut all the way to the castle. She never looked back.

Less than a year later, the queen was brought to childbed. But in her great joy, she forgot to mention to the king her promise to the witches. And then in her great pain, and because it had been such a small promise after all, she forgot it altogether.

As the queen lay in labor in her canopied bed, there came a knock on the castle door. When the guards opened it, who should be standing there but three slouching old women.

"We have come to be with the queen," said the one with pins in her mouth.

The guards shook their heads.

"The queen promised we could make the swaddling cloth," said the second, holding her needle high over her head.

"We must be by her side," said the third, snapping her scissors.

One guard was sent to tell the king.

The king came to the castle door, his face red with anger, his brow wreathed with sweat.

"The queen told me of no such promise," he said. "And she tells me everything. What possesses you to bother a man at a time like this? Begone." He dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

But before the guards could shut the door upon the ancient sisters, the one with the scissors called out: "Be-

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ware, oh King, of promises given." Then all three chanted:

Needle and scissors,
Scissors and pins,
Where one life ends,
Another begins.

The second old woman put her hands above her head and made a circle with her forefinger and thumb. But the one with the pins in her mouth thrust a piece of cloth into the king's hand.

"It is for the babe," she said. "Because of the queen's desire."

Then the three left the castle and were not seen there again.

The king started to look down at the cloth, but there came a loud cry from the bedchamber. He ran back along the corridors, and when he entered the bedroom door, the doctor turned around, a newborn child, still red with birth blood, in his hands.

"It is a girl, Sire," he said.

There was a murmur of praise from the attending women.

The king put out his hands to receive the child and, for the first time, really noticed the cloth he was holding. It was pure white, edged with lace. As he looked at it, his wife's likeness began to appear on it slowly, as if being stitched in with a crimson thread. First the eyes he so loved; then the elegant nose; the soft, full mouth; the dimpled chin.

The king was about to remark on it when the midwife cried out, "It is the queen, Sire. She is dead." And at the same moment, the doctor put the child into his hands.

The royal funeral and the royal christening were held on the same day, and no one in the kingdom knew whether to laugh or cry except the babe, who did both.

Since the king could not bear to part with his wife entirely, he had the lace-edged cloth with her likeness sewn into the baby's cloak so that wherever she went, the princess carried her mother's face.

As she outgrew one cloak, the white lace cloth was cut away from the old and sewn into the new. And in this way the princess was never without the panel bearing her mother's portrait, nor was she ever allowed to wander far from her father's watchful eyes. Her life was measured by the size of the cloaks which were cut bigger each year, and the likeness of her mother, which seemed to get bigger as well.

The princess grew taller, but she did not grow stronger. She was like a pale copy of her mother. There was never a time that the bloom of health sat on her cheeks. She remained the color of skimmed milk, the color of ocean foam, the color of second-day snow. She was always cold, sitting huddled for warmth inside her picture cloak even on the hottest days, and nothing could part her from it.

The king despaired of his daugh-

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ter's health, but neither the royal physicians nor philosophers could help. He turned to necromancers and stargazers, to herbalists and diviners. They pushed and prodded and prayed over the princess. They examined the soles of her feet and the movement of her stars. But still she sat cold and whey-colored, wrapped in her cloak.

At last one night, when everyone was fast asleep, the king left his bed and crept out of the castle alone. He had heard that there were three witch sisters who lived nearby who might give him what he most desired by taking from him what he least desired to give. Having lost his queen, he knew there was nothing else he would hate losing — not his fortune, his kingdom, or his throne. He would give it all up gladly to see his daughter, who was his wife's pale reflection, sing and dance and run.

The witches' hut squatted in the middle of the wood, and through its window the king saw the three old sisters. He did not recognize them, but they knew him at once.

"Come in, come in," they called out, though he had not knocked. And he was drawn into the hut as if pulled by an invisible thread.

"We know what you want," said the first.

"We can give you what you desire," said the second.

"By taking what you least wish to give," said the third.

"I have already lost my queen," he said. "So anything else I have is yours so long as my daughter is granted a measure of health." And he started to twist off the ring he wore on his third finger, the ring his wife had been pledged with, to give to the three sisters to seal his part of the bargain.

"Then you must give us — your daughter," said the three.

The king was stunned. For a moment the only sound in the hut was the crackle of fire in the hearth.

"*Never!*" he thundered at last. "What you ask is impossible."

"What *you* ask is impossible," said the first old woman. "Nonetheless, we promise it will be so." She stood. "But if your daughter does not come to us, her life will be worth no more than this." She took a pin from her mouth and held it up. It caught the firelight for a moment. Only a moment.

The king stared. "I know you," he said slowly. "I have seen you before."

The second sister nodded. "Our lives have been sewn together by a queen's desire," she said. She pulled the needle through a piece of cloth she was holding and drew the thread through in a slow, measured stitch.

The third sister began to chant, and at each beat her scissors snapped together:

Needle and scissors,
Scissors and pins,

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Where one life ends,
Another begins.

The king cursed them thoroughly, his words hoarse as a rote of war, and left. But partway through the forest, he thought of his daughter like a waning moon asleep in her bed, and wept.

For days he raged in the palace, and his courtiers felt his tongue as painfully as if it were a whip. Even his daughter, usually silent in her shroud-like cloak, cried out.

"Father," she said, "your anger unravels the kingdom, pulling at its loosest threads. What is it? What can I do?" As she spoke, she pulled the cloak more firmly about her shoulders, and the king could swear that the portrait of his wife moved, the lips opening and closing as if the image spoke as well.

The king shook his head and put his hands to his face. "You are all I have left of her," he mumbled. "And now I must let you go."

The princess did not understand, but she put her small faded hands on his. "You must do what you must do, my father," she said.

And though he did not quite understand the why of it, the king brought his daughter into the wood the next night after dark. Setting her on his horse and holding the bridle himself, he led her along the path to the hut of the three crones.

At the door he kissed her once on each cheek and then tenderly kissed the image on her cloak. Then, mounting his horse, he galloped away without once looking back.

Behind him the briars closed over the path, and the forest was still.

Once her father had left, the princess looked around the dark clearing. When no one came to fetch her, she knocked upon the door of the little hut. Getting no answer, she pushed to door open and went in.

The hut was empty, though a fire burned merrily in the hearth. The table was set, and beside the wooden plate were three objects: a needle, a scissors, and a pin. On the hearth wall, engraved in the stone, was a poem. The princess went over to the fire to read it:

Needle and scissors,
Scissors and pins,
Where one life ends,
Another begins.

"How strange," thought the princess, shivering inside her cloak.

She looked around the little hut, found a bed with a wooden headboard shaped like a loom, lay down upon the bed and, pulling the cloak around her even more tightly, slept.

In the morning when the princess woke, she was still alone, but there was food on the table, steaming hot. She rose and made a feeble toilette,

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for there were no mirrors on the wall, and ate the food. All the while she toyed with the needle, scissors, and pin by her plate. She longed for her father and the familiarity of the court, but her father had left her at the hut, and being an obedient child, she stayed.

As she finished her meal, the hearthfire went out, and soon the hut grew chilly. So the princess went outside and sat on a wooden bench by the door. Sunlight illuminated the clearing and wrapped around her shoulders like a golden cloak. Alternately she dozed and woke and dozed again until it grew dark.

When she went inside the hut, the table was once more set with food, and this time she ate eagerly, then went to sleep, dreaming of the needle and scissors and pin. In her dream they danced away from her, refusing to bow when she bade them. She woke to a cold dawn.

The meal was ready, and the smell of it, threading through the hut, got her up. She wondered briefly what hands had done all the work, but, being a princess and used to being served, she did not wonder about it very long.

When she went outside to sit in the sun, she sang snatches of old songs to keep herself company. The sound of her own voice, tentative and slightly off-key, was like an old friend. The tune kept running around and around in her head, and though she did not know where she had heard it before, it fitted perfectly the words carved over the hearth:

Needle and scissors,
Scissors and pins,
Where one life ends,
Another begins.

"This is certainly true," she told herself, "for my life here in the forest is different from my life in the castle, though I myself do not feel changed." And she shivered and pulled the cloak around her.

Several times she stood and walked about the clearing, looking for the path that led out. But it was gone. The brambles were laced firmly together like stitches on a quilt, and when she put a hand to them, a thorn pierced her palm and the blood dripped down onto her cloak, spotting the portrait of her mother and making it look as if she were crying red tears.

It was then the princess knew that she had been abandoned to the magic in the forest. She wondered that she was not more afraid, and tried out different emotions: first fear, then bewilderment, then loneliness; but none of them seemed quite real to her. What she felt, she decided at last, was a kind of lightness, a giddiness, as if she had lost her center, as if she were a balloon, untethered and ready — at last — to let go.

"What a goose I have become," she said aloud. "One or two days without the prattle of courtiers, and I am talking to myself."

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But her own voice was a comfort, and she smiled. Then, settling her cloak more firmly about her shoulders, she went back to the hut.

She counted the meager furnishings of the hut as if she were telling beads on a string: door, window, hearth, table, chair, bed. "I wish there were something to *do,*" she thought to herself. And as she turned around, the needle on the table was glowing as if a bit of fire had caught in its eye.

She went over to the table and picked up the needle, scissors, and pin and carried them to the hearth. Spreading her cloak on the stones, though careful to keep her mother's image facing up, she sat.

"If I just had some thread," she thought.

Just then she noticed the panel with her mother's portrait. For the first time it seemed small and crowded, spotted from the years. The curls were old-fashioned and overwrought, the mouth a little slack, the chin a touch weak.

"Perhaps if I could borrow a bit of thread from this embroidery," she whispered, "just a bit where it will not be noticed. As I am alone, no one will know but me."

Slowly she began to pick out the crimson thread along one of the tiny curls. She heard a deep sigh as she started, as if it came from the cloak, then realized it had been her own breath that had made the sound. She wound up the thread around the pin until she had quite a lot of it. Then she snipped off the end, knotted it, threaded the needle — and stopped.

"What am I to sew upon?" she wondered. All she had was what she wore. Still, as she had a great need to keep herself busy and nothing else to do, she decided to embroider designs along the edges of her cloak. So she began with what she knew. On the gray panels she sewed a picture of her own castle. It was so real, it seemed as if its banners fluttered in a westerly wind. And as it grew, turret by turret, she began to feel a little warmer, a little more at home.

She worked until it was time to eat, but as she had been in the hut all the while, no magical servants had set the table. So she hunted around the cupboards herself until she found bread and cheese and a pitcher of milk. Making herself a scanty meal, she cleaned away the dishes, then lay down on the bed and was soon asleep.

In the morning she was up with the dawn. She cut herself some bread, poured some milk, and took the meal outside, where she continued to sew. She gave the castle lancet windows, a Lady chapel, cows grazing in the outlying fields, and a moat in which golden carp swam about, their fins stroking the water and making little waves that moved beneath her hand.

When the first bit of thread was used up, she picked out another sec-

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tion of the portrait, all of the curls and a part of the chin. With that thread she embroidered a forest around the castle, where brachet hounds, noses to the ground, sought a scent; a deer started; and a fox lay hidden in a rambling thicket, its ears twitching as the dogs coursed by. She could almost remark their baying, now near, now far away. Then, in the middle of the forest — with a third piece of thread — the princess sewed the hut. Beneath the hut, as she sewed, letters appeared though she did not touch them.

Needle and scissors,
Scissors and pins,
Where one life ends,
Another begins.

She said the words aloud, and as she spoke, puffs of smoke appeared above the embroidered chimney in the hut. It reminded her that it was time to eat.

Stretching, she stood and went into the little house. The bread was gone. She searched the cupboards and could find no more, but there was flour and salt, and so she made herself some flat cakes that she baked in an oven set into the stone of the fireplace. She knew that the smoke from her baking was sending soft clouds above the hut.

While the bread baked and the sweet smell embroidered the air, the princess went back outside. She unraveled more threads from her mother's image: the nose, the mouth, the startled eyes. And with that thread she traced a winding path from the crimson castle with the fluttering banners to the crimson hut with the crown of smoke.

As she sewed, it seemed to her that she could hear the sound of birds — the rapid flutings of a thrush and the jug-jug-jug of a nightingale — and that they came not from the real forest around her but from the cloak. Then she heard, from the very heart of her lap work, the deep, brassy voice of a hunting horn summoning her home.

Looking up from her work, she saw that the brambles around the hut were beginning to part and there was a path heading north toward the castle.

She jumped up, tumbling needle and scissors and pin to the ground, and took a step toward the beckoning path. Then she stopped. The smell of fresh bread stayed her. The embroidery was not yet done. She knew that she had to sew her own portrait onto the white laced panel of the cloak: a girl with crimson cheeks and hair tumbled to her shoulders, walking the path alone. She had to use up the rest of her mother's thread before she was free.

Turning back toward the hut, she saw three old women standing in the doorway, their faces familiar. They smiled and nodded to her, holding out their hands.

The first old woman had the

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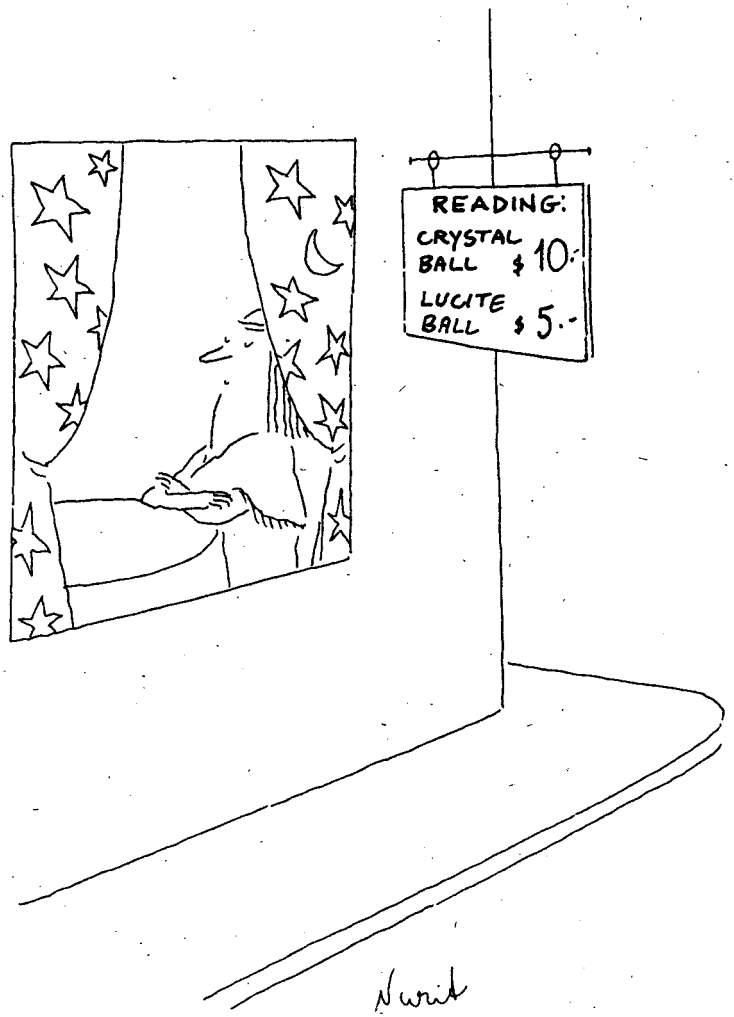
needle and pin nestled in her palm. The second held the scissors by the blades, handles offered. The third old woman shook out the cloak, and as she did so, a breeze stirred the trees in the clearing.

The princess smiled back at them. She held out her hands to receive their gifts. When she was done with the embroidery, though it was hard to part with it, she would give them the cloak. She knew that once it was given, she could go.



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Jim Aikin wrote "The Lilith" (February 1981); his first novel, WALK THE MOONS ROAD, will be published later this year by Del Rey. This new story, about the painful adjustment of a professor of mathematics, is quite unlike anything you have ever read.

My Life In the Jungle

BY
JIM AIKIN

At one time, incongruous as it must now seem, I was a professor of mathematics. I'm not sure that that fact is of any importance, though I *am* fairly certain that it's of no importance to anybody but me. Perhaps I think and feel more deeply because of it. Perhaps my remembrance of the past provides me with a better perspective on the nature of events than those around me are privy to. But it's difficult to be certain — first, because I have no idea what those around me think and feel, if anything; and second, because I cannot quite imagine what I would think and feel if I were otherwise than I am.

There must be millions of us here, wandering perpetually in this desolation of heat and dust. We all, I'm sure, suffer the same torment. Nevertheless, I do feel that I'm different from the others in some subtle but important way because of my former circumstances. But while at one time I could recall my life as a professor of mathematics in great detail (indeed, such fond recollections of the tree-lined campus, the classrooms, the cool quiet of the library, the meticulously reasoned papers I wrote for academic journals, occupied at one time many happy hours), of late the memories have grown dim and fragmentary, and what I can still recall, I take no pleasure in. On the contrary — the contrast between my remembered life and my current situation is a source of further pain. If I remembered more of the details of the past, the pain would only be worse. Fortunately, those memories have been largely overlaid and blotted out by more recent, more brutal scenes, by more pressing needs and immediate concerns.

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Bananas, for instance. As a professor of mathematics, I knew little about bananas, and cared less. They were yellow and grew on trees. I knew, in a general way, what one tasted like. Today, on the other hand, I can identify more than a dozen distinct varieties of bananas, including too green to eat, green but edible, overripe but edible, rotten, wormy but edible, lying on the ground forgotten but still edible, half-masticated and spit out, bitter for no apparent reason, and just right. Then there are somebody else's bananas, bananas stomped into the floor of the jungle and pulped by somebody who was angry, bananas smeared over the body, and bananas hanging too high in the tree to reach. Bananas are a subject of vast and consuming importance to all of us here, me along with the rest.

In recent weeks the band with which I am associated has shrunk by attrition to a fraction of its former size — which, considering the drastic alteration in our environment, is hardly surprising. Originally we numbered between twenty and twenty-five individuals. Even then the number fluctuated from day to day as individuals wandered away and were replaced by others upon whom we happened in our travels. Today the happy state that we enjoyed in the weeks following my arrival is nearly as remote from me as the campus life that preceded it. I look back wistfully on the leafy paradise in which we roamed; nowhere now in this wasteland is such a luxuriant habitat to be found. Had I known then what deterioration would occur, surely I would have tried to find some way to prevent it. Probably nothing I could have done would have done any good. Perhaps, indeed, I would have found myself incapable of acting differently than I have. In any event, at the time I was too busy mourning my lost academic life to pay much attention to the direction in which events were tending. Thus, I did nothing.

Even in those days, it was difficult for me to reliably distinguish one individual of the band from another by sight; now, of course, the problem is compounded a thousandfold. Certain individuals did, however, possess characteristics that enabled me after a time to identify them. I gave them names, in my own mind. The one who was more or less our acknowledged leader I dubbed Blackie, because of the broad irregular stripe of black fur running down his back. In addition to Blackie, there was a particular nervous, excitable little fellow I called Phil; a toothless old female I called Granny (whose principal distinguishing feature was a severe chronic case of diarrhea); and — always at the center of my thoughts — a gentle, doe-eyed female I called Arabella. Ah, Arabella!

Perhaps I should call us a tribe, and Blackie our chief. Not that his chieftainship went unchallenged —

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far from it. We were constantly quarreling amongst ourselves. Indeed, next to foraging for bananas, quarreling has always been our chief occupation. Whenever we happened upon a band of strangers, we set aside our petty internal squabbles and put up a united front, screeching our challenge at them from the treetops and trampling and crushing whatever vegetation might be handy in order to demonstrate our ferocity and our utter contempt for them. They, of course, were simultaneously doing likewise. These noisy, destructive encounters were by far the grandest, most festive events punctuating our life in the jungle. But when no band of strangers was available, the young males not infrequently exhibited the same sort of aggressive behavior toward Blackie. He was not reluctant to reply in kind, and since he was larger and noisier than any of the rest, he inevitably emerged the victor, after which he would swagger around for hours with a self-satisfied smirk pasted on his repulsive features, deliberately bumping into anybody who was not quick enough to move out of his path and grabbing their bananas away from them.

These, then, were the parameters of the new life into which I was thrust — bananas and quarreling and roaming through the trees, or along the jungle floor when no trees were handy. At first the abruptness of the transition from the quiet life of a college professor left me shocked and appalled — only natural, I suppose, under the circumstances. For some weeks I remained in a rather befuddled state, and I am sure that I seemed odd and distant to the others. Fortunately the new body in which I found myself already knew the arts of the jungle survival, else I would surely have perished. Sitting on a limb peeling a banana (a task I executed as expertly as though I had devoted a life's intensive study to it, though I now possessed only incompletely opposable thumbs), I pondered how such a thing could possibly have happened; but I was unable to arrive at any very satisfactory answer. It seemed impossible; in point of fact, it still seems impossible.

Nevertheless, the clarity and reliability of my perceptions made it clear at once that I had not been precipitated into a hallucination or a dream. If I had gone to sleep at night a college professor and wakened the next morning in my present situation, I might have found the dream hypothesis more attractive, but the transition was not cloaked in unconsciousness, nor even accompanied by any sense of movement. At one moment I was standing at a blackboard, explaining the techniques of differential calculus to a class of freshmen and sophomores, most of whom were thoroughly bored and trying to conceal the fact; and then, in the blink of an eye, the classroom, the students, all had

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vanished, and I was sitting on a limb peeling a banana. When I saw how far above the ground I was, I became dizzy and had to cling to the limb to keep from falling; but the dizziness was, I am convinced, a consequence of my reaction, not of the transition itself.

When, a few moments later, I first came face to face with my new companions, again I reacted badly. I was, I regret, somewhat less than cordial. Far from embracing them, I was seized by terror and turned and fled headlong through the jungle, screeching in alarm and confusion. I might easily have become separated from them and thus lost (hardly a serious matter, since I would sooner or later have been bound to stumble upon another virtually indistinguishable band); but when they saw me running, they instantly concluded that this was some grand new game in which I desired their participation, and without hesitation they followed after me, crashing loudly through the underbrush and screeching in concert. Hearing this commotion, I in turn naturally assumed that I was being pursued by those who wished me ill, and thus drove myself to greater exertion attempting to escape them. Eventually I would have outpaced them — except for the unfailing fascination of quarreling, their attention span was not long — but before me suddenly the jungle fell away, and I was brought up short at the edge of a wide grassy plain dotted with distant herds of elephants and zebras. Even then I would have continued, save that directly before me, lolling in the dust, was a family of lions. Before I quite realized what I was doing, I had altered the direction of my progress from the X to the Y axis and scampered up the nearest tree — where, of course, Blackie and the others speedily joined me. For some hours, until the lions moved off in search of game, we had no choice but to remain where we were. Given this opportunity to make an acquaintance with the band, I quickly lost my fear of them. Certainly they had their shortcomings, but I was not insensible of the fact that to be alone in the jungle is less desirable than to be with others with whom one has interests in common.

For some time after the transition, I did wonder whether I might shift back to the classroom as suddenly and unexpectedly as I had left it, whether I might begin shuttling back and forth as a regular thing, or perhaps with as little warning find myself in a third set of surroundings unrelated to either of the others. I no longer think this likely. I seem to be stuck very firmly and permanently where I am. I also wondered whether my new companions might be newly transplanted like myself; but their behavior has never given me any evidence to confirm this hypothesis. My attempts to communicate with them by means of grunts and gestures, by

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drawing signs in the dirt, were met with blank indifference, or on occasion with crude and mocking imitiations of my behavior that could not possibly conceal anything of semantic significance.

I was forced, then, to consider whether *my* overt behavior, however precise or articulate my intentions, was any different than theirs. This is a question I still have not been able to lay to rest. I feel that I am far more intelligent than they, but as I have no method of observing myself from the outside, I am unable to determine whether this inner condition is manifest in any perceptible way. Conceivably, they are as intelligent as I, and we are all equally incapable of communication. As time goes on, admittedly, I am less inclined even to try to establish any meaningful interaction, and I acknowledge with regret that I am no longer much more attentive to matters of cleaniness than they. While I still think of myself as a professor of mathematics, so much time has passed that I might find it difficult to explain the calculus, should the occasion arise, or even to take a square root. I am reluctant, truth be told, to try to remember the details of such operations, for fear I might fail. As long as I don't dwell on the details, I can cling to the idea that I am in fact, if not in semblence, a professor of mathematics. If I tried to remember and failed, I would be forced to consider that after all, I may be no more than what I seem.

It is even possible, though I shudder to think of it, that my memories of that previous life are illusory. I may always have been as I am now. While I may consider myself a professor of mathematics, I would be hard pressed to offer any proof.

Once over the intial shock, I found that my new life offered certain consolations. For example, I no longer had any professional obligations. There were no faculty meetings to attend, no undergraduates to advise, no thesis proposals to approve, no examinations to administer, no appointment calendars or clocks to watch. My new environment, while perhaps less than idyllic, was in the main quite pleasant. The weather was uniformly warm, and although embarrassed at first, I shortly found that I didn't mind much going without constantly being chafed by clothing. I suffered somewhat from boredom, but not excessively. While the course of events was more narrowly circumscribed here, there were endless matters of detail — such as learning to distinguish the many varieties of bananas — to claim my attention. And most of all, by way of consolation, there was Arabella.

It was during my first days in the jungle, when I was still cautiously trying to discover the nature of my situation, that Arabella and I became aware of one another. Far from being impu-

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dently, raucously lewd like most of the other females, she was shy and retiring by nature, even fastidious in comparison with the others (though admittedly the general standards of grooming were deplorably lax, and her own accomplishments in this regard were relative rather than absolute). I no longer recall whether it was she who first approached me or vice versa, but before very long we had become steadfast companions.

Companionship among the tribe was a simple matter, consisting chiefly of long sessions spent picking lice from one another's fur — a necessary task if we were not all to succumb to terminal itching — and it was this activity that formed the primary basis of my relationship with Arabella. How well I remember the gentleness of her hands as they roamed delicately over my back and shoulders! I also from time to time offered her an especially delectable-looking banana; I wish I could report that she reciprocated, but alas, the exchange of such tokens of generosity seemed to be entirely unkown among the tribe. At most, she favored me perhaps with a fleeting glance of appreciation before devoting her attention to the matter at hand — that is, to the banana.

There was a time when I thought Arabella and I could be happy together. I pretended to myself that within her must reside, hidden, a soul akin to my own, though she never gave me any concrete evidence in support of this idea. I seemed to recall a student I had had once who possessed such soft, compassionate eyes, such a sweet disposition, and I fondly imagined that it was with this student that I was passing the hours in our leafy bower. I found, however, that I was unable to remember the student's name, and this dampened my enjoyment of the fantasy somewhat.

No matter. In the evenings, when the tribe had settled down for the night in the boughs of a banana grove, when the air was fragrant with the scent of wild orchards and the occasional sleepy roar of a lion could be heard in the distance, Arabella would come to me and pick the lice from my fur, and I the lice from hers. I am sure she would have allowed a greater degree of familiarity if I had sought it; couplings among the tribe were indulged in quite casually and openly, with no consideration whatever of propriety or decorum. But I could not quite bear to disturb the tranquility of our time together; nor, to be honest, could I ever wholly divest myself of the knowledge that I was after all a professor of mathematics, for whom such a scene must remain too grotesquely undignified ever to take part in.

I have no idea how long this period of arboreal contentment lasted. More than a year, surely; perhaps several. At one time I considered whether I might be able to fashion a crude calendar by carving every day a new

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notch in a convenient tree branch. But even had I possessed a suitable carving tool, it would have availed me nothing, for in our wanderings through the jungle, we rarely spent two nights in the same place. To have carved a single notch in a new tree every night would have been an exercise in futility.

All during this time, our encounters with other roving bands similar to ours continued. These were occasions of some devastation to the jungle, for when we saw strangers, so like us and yet so utterly unlike, we flew into paroxysms of rage. To demonstrate our ferocity, we uprooted whole bushes and young trees, or trampled them into the mud. If the strangers had not begun doing so before us, they imitated us without delay. This activity was accompanied by prolonged screeching, gnashing of teeth, rude gestures, and (though it shames me to admit it) the flinging of excrement. Actual hand-to-hand combat was a rarity, though we sometimes worked ourselves into such a frenzy that no other measures would do to slake our rage. Generally we preferred to take up a safe strategic position, from which, after a thorough display of animosity, we would begin pelting the enemy with bodily wastes — or, when none came readily to hand, with bananas. After a few hours of such excitement, both sides would retire grumbling, leaving behind a battlefield strewn with dung and trampled vegetation.

At first there seemed little harm in this enterprise. After all, the jungle was large, and the scars of battle quickly overgrown. As time went on, however, I noticed that our encounters with bands of strangers were becoming more frequent, and the injuries to the jungle slower to heal. Often in our migrations we came upon old battlegrounds, bedraggled and foul-smelling. On some of these occasions, I could recall that it was we who had participated in the depredation, while on others the geography was not one I recognized. I concluded therefore that we were not alone in provoking and relishing such hostilities.

Unquestionably, we did our share of the destructive work. There was one band in particular with whom we fought repeatedly, in a series of skirmishes that ranged up and down the jungle. If I had been transported originally into their midst rather than into Blackie's group, I don't suppose it would have made the slightest difference, for on the whole we were quite indistinguishable from one another. Nevertheless, we were bitter enemies. On one memorable occasion, we became rivals for a single strand of banana trees, an unusually large and fertile grove whose bananas were among the finest I had ever tasted. In truth, the grove was large enough easily to have fed both our group and the others, but there was no possibility of

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our reaching an accommodation. Arriving one morning at the grove simultaneously from opposite directions, we both took umbrage; each group was determined that it and it alone should occupy this entire site. As a result, we threw more bananas at one another than we ate, and tore more and more leaves from the banana trees in our furious displays of aggression.

When the trees on all sides were wholly denuded, we had no alternative but to uproot them; failure to do so would have been proof of cowardice. The labor of uprooting full-grown trees was prodigious, and required a greater degree of cooperation than our band had shown before, or has since. But we were determined, and when we finished, the trees lay about on the ground like matchsticks. We slammed them down, and grimaced and howled, and tore our fingers on the roots. I cannot say whether our group or the detested strangers uprooted more of the trees; it would have been a victory of sorts, if only symbolic, though I am bound to suppose that nobody but myself was even capable of counting. Perhaps my failure to keep a tally was, under the circumstances, a form of disloyalty. In any event, the upshot was that we completely destroyed the grove, and both tribes had to look elsewhere for sustenance.

One remarkable aspect of these battles was their effect on the one I called Phil. As if in compensation for for the fact that he was unable to best Blackie in our domestic uproars (or, more accurately, that he was unwilling to challenge him), Phil became in our encounters with strangers the most hysterically aggressive of our band. He screeched the loudest, he trampled bushes the most enthusiastically, and he flung excrement with such glee that he generally got more on himself (it not having hardened enough to make proper missiles) than on the enemy. Not that the rest of us were immune from this unfortunate scattering effect. Phil, however, was nervous and excitable at the best of times, and these bouts did him no good. For hours after a battle, he would lie on the ground twitching, eyes rolling far back into his head and foam dribbling from his mouth. He was a pitiful sight, and would have been easy prey for a lion had one happened along. Fortunately for him, he was victimized only by the rest of the young males of our own tribe, who lost no opportunity to urinate on him and otherwise display their contempt while he was helpless.

Nor did I, to my everlasting shame, abstain from this ritual of debasement. Although I had only pity for poor Phil, I feared that to hang back when the rest of the tribe was so eagerly pressing forward would make me conspicuous, and might lead to my being singled out for the same sort of abuse. Even Granny, the aged and incontinent female, participated on these oc-

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casions. Since this was the only time she got the better of anybody, I found it hard to begrudge her the opportunity, though unquestionably it was a disgusting spectacle.

To an outsider it might have appeared that we were demonstrating our disapproval of Phil's extreme pugnacity, but nothing could have been further from the truth; our vociferousness in encounters with strangers was nearly equal to his. Rather, we were deflecting onto Phil the aggressive impulses we had been unable to vent on any less helpless victim. If the band of strangers had been so considerate as to lie down on the floor of the jungle and allow such treatment, our deepest longings would have been fulfilled.

It was on the evening following our destruction — with the collaboration of our habitual nemeses — of the banana grove, that I lost my Arabella. For some time before, to be sure, she had seemed somewhat distracted. Once or twice she actually pushed away a banana I was offering her. But until it was too late, I attached no significance to this. Perhaps if I had — well, such speculation is of no value now. It happened that during the battle, Blackie's usual consort, his favorite of the five or six upon whom he customarily lavished his attentions, had wandered away — where or why, I never learned. In her absense, his roving eye fell upon Arabella; and she, to my sorrow, seemed not to find his attentions distasteful. Disdaining even to undertake a preliminary picking of lice by way of courtship, he mounted her straightaway, as I watched in horror. The lust in his eyes was acid in my heart — and as for Arabella, she continued placidly eating a banana all the time he was at his business. A banana I had given her! Faithless Arabella! I fought him, naturally; I had no choice, if I were to salvage even a tattered remnant of honor. And of course he beat me soundly. I fear that I have always been too inhibited to screech and trample with necessary abandon.

But while I remained furious at Blackie, it was hard to hold Arabella blameless. Far from being distraught by the change, far from pining for me or casting longing glances in my direction, she took to the arrangement as placidly as she had to her life with me, and seemed to want nothing further to do with me. When I approached, humbly beckoning for her to search my back for lice, she pushed me away roughly. At night I was forced to listen to her grunts of pleasure mingled with his. Dismally depressed by this turn of events, I gorged myself on bananas for weeks. Briefly I considered leaving the tribe entirely and striking out through the jungle in search of new companions, but I knew I would carry the unhappy memory with me wherever I went, and would have no peace. As long as I stayed nearby, I could cherish the hope that eventually he would tire of her, or she

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of him. I was unsure whether I would wish to resume our former relations in that case, whether I would be capable of so blithely putting the past behind me, but it seemed wrong to deny myself the opportunity should it arise.

From this time on, it seemed, a change came over our life in the jungle. Or perhaps it was only that, no longer distracted by Arabella's sweet presence, I noticed for the first time a change that had already begun. In deed, as I was searching for distractions, I may have noticed the change long before it became apparent to the others — if indeed it has ever become apparent to them. To this day, I sometimes think, they have not noticed the cataclysmic deterioration in our surroundings. They continue to behave exactly as they did before, though it is no longer appropriate (if it ever was). Perhaps they have no memory of what once was, and thus no way to measure the loss. Perhaps it is only I, among the millions here, who am aware of the disaster we have brought on ourselves. Could I have averted it, if I had acted in time? What could I have done?

We moved on, then, from the destroyed banana grove in search of unspoiled forage. But more and more, the groves we found were already in the possession of bands of strangers, whom we had to drive off in order to enjoy the bananas. The jungle was thick with evidence of past combats, and virgin stretches of wild growth increasingly rare. The first time we came upon two separate bands of strangers fighting for possession of a grove, we retreated in confusion, never having seen such a thing before. But before long we were inured to the sight. We learned that we could pitch in, making it a three-way fight, taking advantage of the fact that the others were already in a debilitated condition to promote our own cause, and on occasion we emerged the victors. For our victory celebration, naturally, we stuffed ourselves with bananas, whether or not they were ripe and continuing long after we had eaten our fill, continuing until we vomited up undigested banana and then reaching for more — for who knew when we might have the chance for such an orgy again? Just as often, we found ourselves unequal to the contest, and were driven off; if not initially, by those who had possession before us, then certainly at a later date, by those who came after. It proved impossible to retain control of any given grove for long, especially as the roving bands were becoming more numerous, and stands of banana trees scarcer. When we could secure victory only by uprooting the trees, naturally we did so; nor have I any reason to suppose we were alone in this improvident behavior. And always, sooner or later, we were compelled to move on, searching, ever searching for a grove where we could

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enter and eat and remain unmolested.

It was after one of these raids that I noticed Arabella was gone. Though it galled me to look on her, now that she was another's, I found that I mourned her loss none the less keenly. I hoped that she had found a haven with another band like ours, new companions who would devotedly pick the lice from her fur. The thought that she might lie crushed under a fallen banana tree, her warm doe eyes forever cold and vacant, was for a long time a source of torment for me. I am compelled to wonder, however, whether such a fate might after all be better for her than to have survived. Our circumstances now are so wretched that, though I may wish she were here to ease my loneliness, I cannot in good conscience desire that she should suffer such pain. Perhaps, nevertheless, she has survived, and wanders here as we do. Perhaps someday I will stumble upon her, and not recognize her, and pass on. Perhaps I have done so already. Ah, Arabella, truly you are lost!

By now our encounters with bands of strangers are no longer frequent; they are continual. Of the jungle, nothing remains. As far as I can see in every direction (which is not far, unless I climb for a moment onto somebody else's shoulders), there is nothing on this arid plain but thousands of bands like ourselves roaming through the dust and filth, screeching foul imprecations at one another, bespattering one another with excre-

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ment, stumbling occasionally over the dried bleached bones of a lion, seeking perpetually in vain for a leafy grove where grow bananas.

Of our group, only myself and Blackie and Granny remain. Wanting nothing to do with Granny, but needing release, Blackie has taken to mounting me instead. I find this humiliating, and rather painful, but I am powerless to prevent it. Also, he demands that I search his fur for lice, while showing no inclination whatever to reciprocate. I itch constantly, agonizingly. When I scratch, my fur comes out in clumps, leaving raw red sores behind. The heat of the sunlight is sufficient to raise blisters, and in the thick dust, I am dreadfully, excruciatingly thirsty. There being no trees left to uproot, some of the more foul-tempered among us have taken to tearing one another's limbs off and belaboring one another about the head with them. The delicious wetness of the blood as it spurts from these horrid wounds goads my thirst to unbearable agony. Once the blood has mingled with the dust, however, its usefulness as a means of allaying thirst is a thing of the past. I find myself wondering whether I could become so crazed by thirst as to do what I am contemplating. Am I actually capable of such savagery? I would like, even in this extemity, to feel that I still possess some measure of dignity, of rationality. After all, I was at one time a professor of mathematics.

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Installment 6: *In Which We Learn What Is Worse Than Finding a Worm of Evil in the Apple*

Some of us are better than the rest of you. Oh, yes we are.

One who is better than the rest of you is a guy who lives in Somerville, Massachusetts, name of John G. Maguire. And John G. is better than most of you because not only won't *he* support corrupt films by buying a ticket to something he's been told overandoverandover is The One Not To Miss!!!, but he can smell that puke smell made by the Worms of Evil and he protects his kids from such movies.

Not in the Falwell m.o. that entails the burning of books and the regimenting of thought and the stifling of imagination, but with a sense of responsibility toward the lives he helped bring into the world. That used to be called being a good father.

And that makes John G. better than lots of you who went, like the pod-people you are, right into the burrows of the Worms of Evil.

You were warned, not just twice by me, but by dozens of other film critics all over America, who advised you in clear, precise language that could not be misunderstood: stay away from GREMLINS (Warner Bros.); it is a corrupt thing, vicious at its core; meanspirited and likely to cause harm to your moral sense. Specifically you were warned: keep little kids away from this thing. Don't equate

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the frights it can cause youthful, plastic minds with the tolerable terror you cherish from your first viewing of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* when you were an impressionable tot. This ain't the same *frisson*. But you went, anyhow, didn't you?

And that makes John G. Maguire leagues better than the rest of you. Better than those of you I've seen in theaters, late at night, last show, with a kid half-dozing in the seat beside you, watching violent movies and teaching your kid to applaud wildly when some stunt double gets blown apart by a shotgun blast, when the Trans Am of the bad guy gets bulldozed over a cliff and tumbles and tumbles and impacts on the hillside and disintegrates into a flaming hellflower. I've seen you, and I know Falwell's got you in his pocket, with your viciousness and your sanctimoniousness. And I dote on the goodness of John G. Maguire.

How do I know about John G. Maguire? I know about him because he wrote to this magazine between the time of my first warning in this column (October 1984) and when I sat down to write this critique; and he said, "I appreciated your warning-off on *Gremlins*. I haven't seen the movie. I read a promo about it in *Newsweek* and decided not to take my kids to it: too vicious. Any movie that seems too vicious for me is too much for my kids. I'm old-fashioned like that."

Good for you, John G. No pod-person you.

But as for the rest of you, those of you who have happily contributed to *Gremlins* doing more than $143,000,000 worth of box-office in the first fifteen and a half weeks of its theatrical release ... as you sat there watching the ripping and rending ... did it cross your mind that *Gremlins* might be less significant as a cinematic event than it is as a grotesque breach of trust with all the kids who hear *Spielberg* and think *E.T.*? And if you can desist for a moment from the kneejerk animosity this attack on your bad taste boils up in you, could you give the barest consideration to the concept that one definition of evil is the manipulation of human emotions to support and excuse the excesses of dishonest art?

Understand: gremlins are a mythic construct toward which I am particularly well-disposed. Few of you out there will have heard of a 1943 Walt Disney production, *Victory Through Air Power*, but that film contained a marvelous episode titled "The Gremlins" (which, with artwork based on the animation cels appeared as a children's books from Random House that year; a children's book written by a certain Flight Lieutenant Roald Dahl: I still own that book). It was my first exposure to the concept of gremlins, and even at the age of nine, which was what I was in 1943, I resonated to the idea. Dinosaurs, lost lands,

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the Titanic, gremlins.

Gremlins, like Kilroy, were the creation of a modern world needing modern mythology. I didn't understand (nor had I, in fact, ever heard of) the dialectical function, Joseph Campbell's cosmological symbolism, Jungian archetypal images or the universal psychic structure called The Trickster. But I knew gremlins was real neat. I loved their puckish pranks. Not just as Disney fifinellas and widgets, but as a character on a radio program I listened to every Saturday morning: *Smilin' Ed McConnell's Buster Brown Gang*, featuring Froggy the Gremlin.

No one who remembers the famous phrase, "Plunk your magic Twanger, Froggy!" could suspect this reviewer of anything but an overwhelmingly postive attitude when I sat there in the pre-release screening of *Gremlins*.

Further: while I am of a mixed mind about the Spielberg canon, having known him since his days on the Universal TV payroll, I would have to say that I'm solidly in his camp. (For the record — and you'll understand in a moment why I go into such minutiae — I admire the following Spielberg films: *Duel*, *Sugarland Express*, *Jaws*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and *E.T. The Extraterrestrial*. I'm not even as great a critic of *1941* as the rest of the world seems to be; it had its whacky moments and I think Steve need not be too bothered that it didn't turn out as he'd intended. My favorite film from the Spielberg factory is, oddly enough, an associational item, as is *Gremlins*: the vastly underrated and strangely unsung *Poltergeist*, which I view as a Tobe Hooper film, influenced by Spielberg. On the other side of the ledger I confess to a dislike of much of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *Twilight Zone: The Movie*.)

Thus, my remarks here about *Gremlins* should not be construed as part of a pattern of denigrating what it is Steven Spielberg turns out. I offer the foregoing as credential in aid of establishing biases.

Thus lighthearted, I jigged a little jog in my seat as the lights dimmed, and with growing horror became as one with the many film critics — from *Time* and *Newsweek* to Gahan Wilson in *The Twilight Zone Magazine* — who have perceived *Gremlins* as a film utterly without restraint, exhibiting a streak of malign viciousness that I now suggest has been a part of Spielberg's *oeuvre* from the first ... subverted and camouflaged heretofore, but now, with Spielberg's ascendancy to the throne of power and freedom in Hollywood, freed from its Pandora's Box and permitted free rein.

Gremlins suffers from the dreaded Jerry Lewis Syndrome: it vacillates between a disingenuous homeliness and an egomaniacal nastiness. It is by turns so bewilderingly schizoid that one reels from the shifts, cloyingly

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cute and cuddly — so arch, so coy, so aspartameously endearing that Tonstant Viewer fwowed up — and monstrously evil in such a way that one spike speaks to all crucifixions; embodying in the gremlins the most loathsome traits of human beings without a compensatory balance of positive human values. It is all the specious arguments you've ever heard as to why the human race should be nuked till it glows, rolled into one vile paradigm and served up with an aw-shucks, toe-scuffling, ain't-we-cute anthropomorphism so contemptible one leaves the theater wanting to get one's soul Martinized.

We have been convinced, through hundreds of interviews and analyses of Spielberg's motivations, that he makes the kind of films he wants to see, the kind he liked when he was a kid. Thus we are led to believe that what we're getting, expensively turned out, made with the highest level of cinematic expertise and most *courant* SFX state of the art, are films dreamt by an adult who sees with the eyes of a child. But if this is so, then there is surely a twisted adolescent intelligence at work in this picture. Because, as one of the stars of the film, Hoyt Axton, has said: "*Gremlins* is *E.T.* with teeth."

Fangs is more accurate.

And so, we trust Steven Spielberg. Unlike *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, released at nearly the same time as *Gremlins* and bearing some sidebar attention (later in this essay) to the thesis at hand, which is obviously a film intended for the mentality of Huck Finn boys, no matter how old they may be, *Gremlins* has been aimed straight at little kids. The same wide-eyed tots who wept when E.T. gasped his last. A trusting, innocent audience that cannot discriminate between Lucas films and Spielberg films — so umbilically linked are these two old chums — and so, when it sees "Steven Spielberg presents *Gremlins*" it thinks *Star Wars*; it thinks *E.T. The Extraterrestrial*; it thinks Reese's Pieces (or M&M's); it thinks Oh boy!

But the mind of Steven Spielberg is not that of a child grown older but not grown-up. It is a mind, from the evidence passim this film, of an adult who has grown to maturity with a subliminal freightload of cynicism and meanspirited animus. Cloaked in the gee-whiz of *hommages* to B sci-fi flicks and simplistic Capra paeans to a small town America that truly existed only in the wish-fulfillment of Hollywood scenarists, *Gremlins* comes to that tot audience with comfy images of loveable aliens, sweetfaced urchins, incompetent parents and stories that come right in the end. All set? Now scare the hell out of those kids! Suck them in, con them with what went before, and then open that corroded Pandora's Box. Let the Worms of Evil eat their fill!

An adult who sees with the eyes

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of a child? I think not. More probably an adult who retains the meanness of kids in the schoolyard, waiting to strike back for the inequities of getting teased, and being sent to bed without any supper, and having to do as one is told *because*. Let me not venture too deeply into cheap, vest-pocket psychoanalysis. I don't know what is in Steven Spielberg's mind; all I know is what I saw on the screen. And what I saw, apparently what many others also saw, was a grotesque breach of trust with that tot audience.

I heard children scream and cry in *Gremlins*.

I spoke to the manager of a theater in Columbus, Ohio who told me he has never before had so many instances of people demanding their money back. I have my own loathing to reconcile.

One can rend this film on many levels, apart from the ethical. What are we to say about the remarkable similarity between the *mogwai* stage of gremlin development and artist Michael Whelan's conception of Piper's Little Fuzzys? (One tries to be evenhanded when crediting the "influences" on Lucas and Spielberg. One credits a lot to *hommage* — until the moment comes with De Palma films, for instance, when one chokes on the phrase "homage to Hitchcock" and simply shouts, "Thief!" One tries to overlook memories of Edd Cartier's hokas when one sees ewoks. Yet one cannot indefinitely put from mind the many, many press items about plagiarism suits directed against this most successful of director-entrepreneurs. One remembers Richard Matheson's short story and *Twilight Zone* teleplay, "Little Girl Lost" and wonders why Matheson never raised a question about *Poltergeist* ... until one remembers that Matheson — hardly a member of the Spielberg coterie — was hired to write Spielberg's subsequent production of *Twilight Zone: The Movie*. And one smiles to oneself at the possibility that this gentle, vastly talented writer may have escaped the toils of a decade-long legal imbroglio while yet preserving his integrity. Shadows darken the mythic Spielberg kingdom.)

And what of those endlessly distracting *hommages* that tremble in the corners of every jam-packed frame? (For director Joe Dante has absorbed Spielberg's patented technique of packing every shot as if it were your Granny's bric-a-brac cabinet.) Polly Holliday stalks down the street and the background music, as well as her demeanor, remind us of Margaret Hamilton in *The Wizard of Oz*; a poster half-seen on a wall is for Agar Pest Control, and we're supposed to chuckle at the reference to John Agar's co-starring role in the 1955 *Tarantula*; at a gadgeteer's convention we see the time machine from the 1960 George Pal adaptation of Wells's classic, we cut away, and when we cut back ... it's vanished a la

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1979's *Time After Time*; a legend on a door tells us this is the Office of Dr. Moreau; the marquee of a theater, seen fleetingly as the camera pans, announces *Watch the Skies* (the original title intended for *Close Encounters* and the last line of the original version of *The Thing*) and *A Boy's Life* (the working title for *E.T. The Extraterrestrial*), and we are not supposed to snort at the filmmaking paying homage to *himself*, fer chrissakes; as Hoyt Axton makes a phone call a man in a hat stands behind him making notes, and the man is the film's composer, Jerry Goldsmith ... we cut away ... and when we cut back Goldsmith has been replaced by Robby the Robot, wearing Goldsmith's hat, speaking precisely the lines he spake in *Forbidden Planet*. But it goes on and on and on, world without end, amen. This is no longer the mild amusements, the inside jokes of those who love film and its history. It is intrusive. It keeps one's attention partially distracted from the emptiness of soul up there on the screen where the action is hysterical. *Gremlins*, like *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, and as many other Lucas-Spielberg products as you care to recall, is a showoff's movie.

Spielberg and Lucas and their protégés are scabby-kneed, snotty-nose neighborhood urchins scaring the crap out of their elders by walking a plank across a building excavation. They are so busy letting us know how clever they are, that they counterproductively shatter the best, first rule of film direction: don't make the direction obvious.

As Frank Capra, who is *hommaged* to exhaustion in *Gremlins*, proved: the most artful direction is that which warms the audience into thinking the film was not directed at all, that it's just happening as they watch.

Further, it is possible to savage *Gremlins* on the level of character and motivation. The boy and girl who play the leads are impossible! The boy is supposed to be one of those apple-cheeked virgins Capra used as icons, but he's old enough to work in a bank — though he lives in his parents' attic in a room filled with the toys of a ten-year-old — and his girl friend is Ms. Phoebe Cates, who has managed to shed her clothes in every film I've seen in which she has a speaking part. (And though I'll be accused of something or other, I suppose we're expected to comment on Ms. Cates's firm flesh, otherwise why are we gifted with such regular peeks at it?) Ms. Cates is also supposed to be an apple-cheeked virgin, yet she is privileged to deliver the speech that is possibly the moment of worst taste in the film, a verbal recounting of that old Gahan Wilson cartoon about daddy dressed as Santa Claus and suffocating in the chimney on Christmas Eve. I submit that this iniquitous moment encapsulates the meanspiritedness of the film: taking the Capra Christmas motif and turning it into

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a toxic waste dump.

No one seems very surprised at the existence of *mogwai*. Not the father, played by the intelligent Hoyt Axton, not the mother, not the high school science teacher, not the apple-cheeked hero and heroine. It seems to me that not even in the fantasy world of a film such as this should the introduction into everyday life of an impossible thing cause such little startlement.

The instructions given to Axton on the three things one should never never *never* do to a *mogwai* on pain of terrible consequences — shine light in their eyes, let it get wet, and feed it after midnight — are never explored by Axton when he gets the creature. Even a shmuck asks for a book of instructions when he buys a microwave oven. And, of course, because it's an idiot plot, all three caveats are ignored so frivolously, so offhandedly, that we know from the moment we hear them that they have been entered merely to be transgressed.

But since everyone else in the film acts like a bonehead, how naive of us to pretend to amazement that the plot has been manipulated so crassly. For of fools there is no dearth in this film. Glynn Turman, as the high school science teacher who borrows one of the gremlin offspring to study, has just seen the wire cage containing the creature ripped open, has seen the creature grab a test tube and has heard the sound of the thing eating it, and yet he tracks it around the darkened schoolroom (he had been running a science film for his students and the lights were out) without having the common sense to *turn on the lights*. And though he knows the thing is ravenous enough to eat a *test tube*, fer chrissakes, he nonetheless acts like a fool and extends a candy bar, held in his naked hand, into the shadows under a desk. When we hear him scream, and later when we see him lying dead, just enough in shadow so we cannot tell how far up his body the evil gremlin ate, we are told by apologists for this film's systematic violence that "nothing is shown."

Yet we must remember that film is a simulacrum of life. It is not a "cartoon" (a subject I'll cover next time). A *cartoon* is a cartoon. Live-action is one remove from the real thing. And in this film we see people being smashed by a snowplow that goes right through their house, we see a woman hurled at a prodigious speed through a second-storey window, we see Harry Carey, Jr. stick his hand into a mailbox and hear the sound of gnawing, we see a mother's face bloody with the raking of talons. And we are expected to laugh. We are told this ain't for real, it's a cartoon. But if you chew off someone's arm, they will bleed to death, slowly and horribly. If you run a snowplow through someone's home and smash them, you will grind them to pulp. If

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you throw someone from a second-storey window at a prodigious speed, her neck will be broken. And no amount of breakdancing and beer-swilling and emulation of human behavior by malevolent fanged creatures can remove the rotten core of violence that poisons this entire film. It is, truly, *The Muppet Chain Saw Massacre.*

Inconsistency: "If these evil gremlins get to water, they'll multiply forever. We have to keep them from water." This film takes place at Christmastime. There is snow everywhere. Last time I checked, snow was mostly made of water.

Rasa, tabula, one each.

Or should we simply point out, and accept wearily, the reality that this film is nothing but a cynical marketing device for Gizmo and Stripe dolls, *Gremlin* lunch buckets, *mogwai* pajamas, premiums, doodads, million-buck marketables?

It has been pointed out to me that I may not, at risk of bearing false witness, lay the onus of moral bankruptcy re *Gremlins* at Steven Spielberg's gate. This, I have been reminded, and scenarist Chris Columbus assured me in a recent telecon that it is so, is a film directed by Joe Dante, that Spielberg was off on location with *Temple of Doom* when *Gremlins* was in production. In all fairness, yes, this is Dante's work and is filled with the kind of violence Dante delivered in *Hollywood Boulevard*, *Piranha*, and *The Howling*. And it emanates from an original screenplay by Columbus (who wrote *Reckless*). But Columbus also told me that he went through several drafts of the script, over a period of months, with Spielberg himself, before he was given Dante as collaborator on another few passes.

All this taken into consideration, true or false, each contributor's part in the action increased or softpedaled for whatever reasons of politics (perhaps in fear of a repeat of the *Poltergeist* fiasco, in which Spielberg was rumored to have done the direction while Tobe Hooper stood around the set with his thumb in his mouth, a rumor that time has proved to be utterly false and destructive to Hooper's reputation), it is Spielberg's bio that leads off the press kit furnished by Warner Bros. It is Spielberg's name above the title in the *TV Guide* two-page advertisement. It is Spielberg's name that sold this film to ten-year-olds and their parents.

And in the same way that the mindless think Walt Disney wrote *Bambi* and *Pinocchio*, never having heard of Felix Salten or Carlo Collodi; in the same way that they think Rod Serling wrote every segment of *The Twilight Zone*; and in the same way that no amount of setting the record straight (with a knowing wink and an elbow nudge) will convince most people that Tobe Hooper, not Spielberg, directed *Poltergeist*; in that same way, and with equal responsibility, this is a

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Spielberg film bearing the freight of his cinematic vision and execution.

Perhaps I do sin against the innocent when I suggest that this movie fits neatly into the Spielberg canon because it lies under the shadow of his Gray Eminence throughout ... but it's a belief I cannot, try as I might, shake from my considerations when appraising *Gremlins*.

And I suspect the free ride is over for Spielberg in terms of uncritical adoration. For *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* lets loose the Worms of Evil with its brutalization of children as a device to shock, and that's the first true glimpse of the darker side of the force that motivates the Lucas-Spielberg films — though it's there, subtly, in most of their movies, one way or another — and *Gremlins* fully opens that Pandora's Box: it combines, at last, the softest, most empty-headed, meretricious and dangerous elements of the entire Lucas-Spielberg genre.

And whether you call it Bedford Falls or Kingston Falls, *Gremlins* savages to evil effect a world that need not have been trashed so callously.

Steven Spielberg has more power, more freedom, more top of the mountain access to the best the industry has to offer, than anyone in the history of moviemaking. He has talent coming out of his ears. And I do not think the unquestioning adoration that has been visited on him is repaid by the sort of films he now seems inclined to make. It is presumptuous for me, or anyone, to tell an artist what to create; but it is the responsibility of the audience to alert a force as potent as Spielberg to the possibility that too much isolation, and too many yes-men, and too much money, and too much cynicism can turn the sweetest apple rotten to the core.

We have all taken bites from that apple. And what is worse than finding a Worm of Evil in the apple is finding *half* a Worm.

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Ian Watson, whose "Slow Birds" (June 1983) was a Hugo and Nebula award nominee last year, returns with a gripping story about Harry and Helen Sharp and their remarkable encounter with African wild life.

White Socks

BY
IAN WATSON

Harry and Helen Sharp had been married for a year; this African nation had been been independent for two years. Back home Harry would have been an ordinary accountant, whereas here he was an expert, for the Ministry of Finance. Both he and Helen were liberally-minded, which was why they had come to work in black Africa; and Harry would have been the first to admit that their present conditions — house in the Oyster Bay area, interest-free loan for a Volkswagen beetle — were artificially exalted. No expert, he, except by contrast to the locals.

One thing which they *were* expert on after twelve months, however, was marriage; which was why the Ismaili wedding reception they'd attended the other day had filled them with amusement and wry sympathy; and still did, as they drove up-country.

The bride, Gulzar, had been a secretary at the Ministry; Harry had been kind to her, friendly, interested. The lives of these Asians in a black African country struck him as poignant, like those of an endangered species; and almost mysterious. So the invitation to the reception had given them both fascinating insights. Which they still mulled over, as Harry drove along.

"Did you see all that glitter on the bridal bed?" sighed Helen. (For all the guests had been invited upstairs to inspect the scene of the forthcoming defloration.) "It was the same glassy grit they stick on Christmas cards to make them sparkle. Have you ever caught a speck under your fingernail? Imagine *that* sprinkled all over the sheets on *our* wedding night!"

"It all comes from weighing the Aga Khan in diamonds," said Harry. "Ismailis have a thing about glitter –

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and sweet stuff. What intrigued me was the bowl of chocolate and fudge by the bedside to give them strength."

"The walls were only plywood, thin as can be. Gulzar was as white as a sheet, poor girl."

"Except for her hands!"

True enought. Curly tattoo-like chocolate coloured patterns had been painted on the bride's hands for good luck, so that she had looked as though she was suffering from some skin disease. Etiquette forbade Gulzar to raise those decorated hands to her mouth, consequently all the old women of her own family and her husband's in turn had forcefed her with chunks of wedding cake; crumbs had dribbled down Gulzar's white bridal dress. And as they passed by, one by one, the old fat women had each pressed a banknote into Gulzar's lucky hands till by the end of it all the bride had seemed to be clutching a huge crumbled napkin which she wasn't allowed to use to clear the crumbs away.

"Did you notice how silent the whole thing was?" asked Harry. "No music or speeches. Blank faces, silence. I wonder how much Gulzar knew about sex?"

They both smiled with complicity.

The windows of the VW were wound down to ventilate the car, in the heat. Already they had covered a hundred miles of paved road, which was bound to end soon. The blacktop strip stretched ahead in an almost unwavering straight line through the bush, merely rising and falling with the lie of the land. Branching euphorbias rose as high as medium-sized trees. An occasional lone baobab was a giant white squid standing to attention. Other trees dangled long phallic gourds from their fingertips. Here and there narrow foot-tracks cross-hatched the wild bush, signs of hidden smallholdings — or a black-shrouded woman might be standing in shade balancing a great bundle of wood on her head; or else some baskets of charcoal might be placed by the roadside for collection. Otherwise at first glance who lived here; or could live here? By contrast with the tame green coastal wilderness, here was a vast barrenness. There seemed to be no human presence; though there was. It simply took a while to register it.

The road itself carried many oil trucks, some of which were old and rickety, stacked high with drums; others were new Italian models with fat rubber slugs of oil squatting on their backs. Already on their journey the VW had smoothly overhauled ten or twelve such, not to mention several wrecks, one completely upside-down and still leaking from burst drums. For the truckers of the oil-run continued driving all night long.

Presently mountains heaved into the sky, to the south-west.

"The Ulugurus," said Helen.

A few weeks earlier they had gone to the cinema in town. In the bar over beers, with a fan clacking slowly

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overhead, they had talked to a Maltese prospector while they waited for the show to start. Helen had told him how she and Harry were planning a one-night safari to the Mikumi game reserve; every journey, no matter how slight or modest, was a 'safari'. He in turn had confided sourly that the mountains they would pass en route were full of Lithium, solid walls of Lithium; but since a South African company held the mining rights and no profits could be sent to South Africa, those mountains couldn't be mined.

"Uluguru: like the sound of the wind moaning through the peaks," she added.

Foothills, sweeping gently down towards the road, were clad in sisal: an estate cutting a swathe through the bush. The monotonous rows of green spikes, in red earth, were serviced by a rusty narrow-gauge railway line.

Soon they passed a rest-halt for oil truckers: a lone mud hut, the thatch waterproofed with rusty drum lids. A few trucks were pulled up outside. The drivers stood around drinking beer out of old jam tins fitted with wooden handles.

A few miles further on, they overhauled a raggy man running along the road. He ran frantically, leaping and jerking, heading along the tarmac from nowhere to nowhere. He didn't appear to hear the car engine till the VW was passing him; then as they did pass he leapt into the ditch, and back out again, waving crazily after them, his arms semaphoring.

What did the man want? Was his child dying? Should they stop? They'd been advised not to stop, by the prospector. They had felt strong liberal qualms about such advice, but now that the situation presented itself, they heeded him. However, Harry and Helen said nothing to each other about the man; not at the time. Instead they carried on discussing the Ismaili wedding with a bitter humor. In any case, they couldn't have asked the man what he wanted; their Kiswahili wasn't adequate. And an oil truck would be along soon, driven by one of his own people.

Then the tarmac ended; quite suddenly, as though funds had run out unexpectedly. Or as though here was an invisible frontier, between dry wilderness with a few people dwelling in it, and the same with only wild animals present. Ahead the road ran straight as ever, but now it was red and rutted. Red dust was billowing up from an oil truck further on, blotting out the road in a sandstorm of grit.

Another oil truck barrelled through the clouds of dirt, coming their way, its headlamps full on even in the middle of the afternoon. That vehicle also dragged a storm of sand and pebbles behind it. Harry slowed down. He couldn't see ahead now. Hastily they wound the windows up, and stifled.

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"That fellow back there...." He spoke as though their loss of momentum had put them within reach of some form of retribution. "What do you suppose he wanted?"

"Which fellow?"

"That strange fellow running along the road like a madman, kicking his legs in the air, waving his arms about...."

"He wanted a lift, I suppose."

"I mean, was it something serious? People don't just run, not in this heat."

"Well, *he* was just running."

"He did wave at us, didn't he?"

"No, I don't really think so. He was taken by surprise. Remember how he jumped off the road? He was waving his arms like that to keep his balance."

"I watched him in the mirror. He carried on running."

"Ooh this dust.... Can't you get past?"

"Too risky." Harry had to squirt and sweep the windshield with the wipers every minute or so; he wondered how long the water would hold out.

Dry grass by the road was red. Trees were dusted with red powder: the storm-drift from countless trucks. And a red giraffe flickered among the trees, twitching its hairy ears.

"Giraffe, see!"

"Where?"

"You've missed it."

"You imagined it."

"No, it was there among those trees. It ran off."

But not all wild animals were dismayed by the rattle and stink of trucks. Soon the oil-slug ahead pulled up. Harry coasted the VW past, and there were elephants on the road a hundred yards further on. He braked. In the mirror he noticed the African truck driver high in his cab sit back and light a cigarette. *He* didn't intend to bully this elephant family with his heavy vehicle. Easy to see why. Some other driver had done so in the past, and the baby of the group was hobbling with one of its hind legs bent double and the bare bone shafting through the hide. Mindful of the cause, the bull lashed the road with his trunk, scooping up spouts of dust and stones, squinting at the vehicles malevolently. Harry engaged reverse and backed up a few yards.

"Don't switch off."

"No."

On the far side of the group another oil slug halted and doused its lights. And the road stretched off into the distance, visibly at peace, with only a crippled baby elephant and the moody bull and a dusty black slug on wheels watching it silently.

"Still, I'd rather be an Ismaili than a Hindu when it comes to dying," said Harry, eyeing the bull elephant nervously. "That grisly barbecue of a crematorium by the beach! The iron bars black with smoke, that greasy pile of ashes underneath...."

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"I like Ismailis. They're adaptable."

"They're soft," he said. "Soft as marshmallows. It's too easy to bully them."

While they were waiting, they wound the windows down. Hardly had they done so, than fierce flies were clustering at their feet like a cloud of devils or Furies. The flies bit right through their socks. They had to tear them loose one by one. However, the bull soon moved off the road and they were able to drive on, this time ahead of the oil truck. Once the VW was in motion, with air whipping through, all the flies fled back to pester animals instead.

Mikumi camp was a half mile away from the main road, and once they were there the noise of the oil trucks using the route was reduced to an insect hum. Far from acting as an irritant to spoil the sense of peace, the occasional passage of trucks only seemed to exaggerate the stillness out in the real raw bush, where the camp was. Otherwise after a while this stillness might have gone unnoticed. By being punctuated, it became a rapt presence, of silence.

The camp's Land Rover was out in the park spotting game, which was easier to find at dusk and dawn, when the animals used the few waterholes. A couple of Peugeots, another VW and a Mercedes were parked beneath leafless barren trees outside of widely separated green tents — to which a white-aproned Boy, perhaps thirty years of age, was ferrying canvas buckets of water over the beaten brown earth.

There was no boundary line between camp and park. For that matter there was no sign of a 'park'. There was only a level plain of beaten earth with some tiny black dots moving about in the distance, and beyond those a long low belt of trees, and behind the trees, hills where sickles of fire were burning off dead straw. Smoke clouds hung over several areas, though from the look of the ground it was a wonder what there was to burn. Out of that barren emptiness flowed the silence, the everlasting lull, within which presumably secret little acts of violence occurred: the bites of flies, the breaking of gazelle necks by clawed paws....

The hunter's wife was German: an ample middle-aged Frau in a ballooning cotton dress. She was sitting in the largest marquee writing out a grocery list.

She offered Harry and Helen chilled imported German beer, though the white-aproned boy had to be summoned to take the bottles from the paraffin refrigerator beside her, and uncap them.

For a few minutes the German woman talked about Lushoto, two hundred miles to the north, where it was just like the Austrian Tyrol with cows wearing clanking bells around

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their necks amid grassy meadows and cool fir-clad slopes, and where some of the old Africans only spoke Kiswahili and German, no English. She reminisced sadly about German East Africa, though she couldn't have known that time personally, and about cowbells in the misty mornings, gazing round her as she did so at the flat beaten plain, the dessicated trees, the burning hills. Then, having adequately hosted Harry and Helen in her opinion, she busied herself in her grocery list again.

"Maybe Gulzar went to Lushoto for her honeymoon," speculated Helen.

"What on earth for?"

"And maybe they spent the whole time in that plywood cell amidst the glitter eating candy bars!"

A middle-aged Asian in shorts walked into the marquee and wanted a beer too; they had heard another car arrive a while before.

"Ech, back again, Mr. Desai?" sighed the German Frau.

"As you say," he replied affably, sitting himself in a canvas seat across from Harry. As he settled, a gray testicle bulged out of his shorts, lolling in shadow against the top of a brown leg. Somehow it looked a tired testicle.

"Every weekend I come here," he told Harry and Helen, "for photography." His eyes gleamed and moved rapidly. He had large hands with prominent veins; a swollen vein also ran across his forehead, from which the hair was thinning away. "Most of all I want to photograph leopard. I have all the others. Elephants and rhino and buffalo. Lions: I have lions making love. I'd like to show you those pictures. But leopards is what I want most. You see leopard in your headlights at night but he runs away so fast you don't have time to take a picture. Have a beer with me, will you? It's a long time yet till your dinner. Go on — go on! I come here so often, it's my second home. Isn't that right, Mrs. Boll?"

At the sound of her name the German woman looked up from her list and stared vaguely at the Asian as though she didn't recognize him in the fast-failing light.

"I said I come here so often it's my second home, Mrs. Boll."

"Mr. Desai is very enthusiastic about wild life," said Mrs. Boll in a bored voice.

Since a half-litre bottle of German beer out here in the bush costs five shillings fifty, Harry accepted the offer.

With the rapid onset of dusk, Desai's errant testicle had retired into darkness. Parrafin lamps were lit by the Boy, and hung up hissing. However, the world hadn't yet closed in to the circle of light in the camp. The fires on the hill slopes grew brighter. A half-moon hung hazily in the smoke pall raised by the bush fires, cupped like a crude yellow bowl, its flat rim

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parallel with the hilltops.

"I bring all my family with me," said Desai. "My wife and my children, and this time my uncle and his wife too. We bring our own food with us and heat it up in the tent. I don't like German meals. Have you seen any game yet?"

"Only a crippled baby elephant, and a bull," said Helen.

"And a giraffe," Harry added.

"A camouflaged giraffe. How many children have you, Mr. Desai?"

"Four children. Ages six, seven, eight and ten. One boy and three girls," he reeled off. "You must see them. They are pretty children. My wife would like you to see them."

They chatted. Harry said that he worked for the Ministry of Finance, then, joked — since Desai responded that he was an importer — that probably Mr. Desai knew more about finance.

And how did Mr. and Mrs. Sharp like Africa? enquired the Asian. To this, the answer just had to be enthusiastic — though maybe Desai himself despised Africans, the wild life excluded....

When Desai invited Harry and Helen to share curry with him and family, Harry didn't refuse. Harry wanted to see those pictures of lions making love. Helen wanted to see Desai's pretty children, and to meet his wife. Besides, in the interests of economy they hadn't been planning to eat the Frau's dinner at ten shillings per head; they had brought sandwiches and boiled eggs.

What struck Harry immediately about Desai's tent was the smell. It wasn't a *smelly* smell, a stink, oh no. This was a heady, sense-assaulting odor compounded of curry and what Harry presumed must be recently burnt joss sticks.

"Do you burn incense?" Harry asked.

Desai flashed a quick smile. "Later, I'll tell you later."

The four children stared at their visitors with large round black eyes, and were silent. The girls were wearing thin cotton slips, which no doubt they would soon be going to bed in. Their mahogany legs were as thin as sticks; dingy ribbons tied their long black pigtails. The boy, who was eldest, wore white shorts. He had the same thin brown legs and greasy black hair as the girls.

The two women in the tent greeted Harry and Helen with smiles, which soon faded away. Desai's wife looked surprisingly young, small and slender. Desai's aunt, on the other hand, was a fat severe-looking woman of about fifty. Her tall thin husband asked Harry a few questions, then simply sat looking. As soon as the women began dishing out the rice and curry, the children started to chatter to each other in Kutchi.

When Desai sat on the bed opposite Harry and Helen to eat his curry,

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his wayward testicle squeezed to the fore again.

After the meal the four children were packed off to bed unceremoniously in the rear portion of the tent. Desai fetched a box of color slides, which he handed to Harry. The only way to view the slides was to hold them up to the parrafin lamp; thus the pictures were little more than confusing blotches. Harry felt lightheaded, besides, and dropped several plastic images of what might have been copulating lions. Whilst he and Helen were doing their best to make these out, Desai and his Uncle popped large triangular folds of dull green leaf into their mouths, wads of leaf about as large as could be popped into a mouth and still leave space to chew.

"Pan," explained Desai. "You want some? Ha ha, very hot! Only we Indians can eat it." But he didn't offer any, to test their courage. "How do you like my exposures, eh? Yes, they're not bad, but I need leopard now. Tonight I'll take the Peugeot out and look for him. I'll dazzle him in my headlights and take pictures of him with big frightful eyes.... No, you can't eat Pan, my friend, my friends, but I'll tell you what: you can smoke some bhang with us."

So it was Indian hemp, marijuana, not Indian incense which accounted for the smell pervading the tent....

Desai unscrewed a film cassette and offered round the dry home-made cigarettes packed inside.

After a while Desai switched on a portable radio. The nine o'clock news was just beginning, but Harry found the announcer's sentences hard to follow. Each separate word triggered a cartoon picture for him: an image caricaturing what the word suggested, with a speech bubble above containing the word itself written out. This parody vision was superimposed on the wall of the tent as on a screen. Cartoon images succeeded each other so swiftly that he couldn't seize hold of a single one of them.

So this, he thought, is the true quality of my imagination. It's a strip cartoon, a farcical helter skelter. For a while this seemed to be a profound, and unsettling discovery.

It was as though he was hypnotised not to understand the whole message — yet in another part of his head he could follow the news perfectly well. A question of attention, therefore! He was finding it hard to pay attention. The paraffin lamp was hissing brightly. He had an erection from seeing Desai's daughters lying in their flimsy slips on top of those camp beds crowded at the rear; lying on, not in, because it was so hot. A forest of brown matchstick legs and arms teased his eyes, though he tried not to look.

The news seemed to be lasting an inordinately long time. What was happening in the world? The news must

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be vitally important to bother relaying it all the way to the middle of nowhere for their special benefit. Harry imagined the radio waves passing through a grazing rhino en route, printing cartoon pictures like X-rays on its huffer-puffer lungs....

If only he could just sit happily glazed like Desai, an idol among his incense, enjoying his own confusion! Harry was no more experiencing visions of the truth than Desai's slides of lions copulating were other than jumbled blurs....

"Leopard," announced Desai, as though reading Harry's thoughts. "Let's go and find leopard. It's time." He rose.

"But you can't drive around in the dark when you've just been...." Helen tailed off, lost in the maze of her own words.

"You'll be safe with me, Madam. You said we would go out and look for leopard. That was the agreement. Are you trying to back out? You'll make me an angry man."

"Don't go," Helen whispered.

Harry could see the sense in her caution, but on the other hand there was a perfectly simple way out. It was night; their own tent was some way off.

"We'll go to our tent first," Harry told Desai. He spoke in a manner which left no doubt. "And when we're there," he muttered to Helen, "we'll see...."

Harry helped his wife up. "Many thanks for the meal!" he called to the two Asian women. From the back of the tent, where they had both retired, Desai's wife and aunt smiled and nodded.

"Isn't your uncle coming?" asked Harry.

The gaunt man made a negative gesture, spreading his hands flat on the bed, two branches of gray veins.

Outside, it was pitch black. The moon had disappeared. The fires in the hills had either moved nearer, or else new fires had sprung up on the plain, though this didn't make the darkness any less dark. Drums were throbbing in the night, somewhere. Or perhaps this was the beat of Harry's own blood?

Helen was very reluctant to follow Harry into the black depths of the Peugeot.

"What's the matter with English Madam?" demanded Desai. "Your gentleman's in the car!"

"We'd rather walk, thanks."

"You're joking! What about the wild animals?"

"I'm sure they won't come into the camp."

"Won't come into the camp! Last month a woman like you went to the toilet in the middle of the night and met a lion. My friend the German hunter had to chase him away with fireworks. So don't insult me."

"We'd rather walk to clear our

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heads. It was so stuffy...."

"What's this *stuffy?*"

"Harry, please get out of the car and we'll walk."

"Helen, *please,*" came her husband's voice. "We're just going to our tent in his car, don't you understand?"

"Damn fool woman, she annoys me," swore Desai. "What's stuffy? You English come into our homes, then when you're bored with looking at us.... But you aren't going to be bored. We're going on a leopard hunt!"

"Get in, will you?" Harry hissed from the front seat.

Helen did so, clambering into the back.

As soon as Desai had switched the engine on, he leaned over swiftly and locked Helen's door. While she was fumbling to try to unlock it and failing to find the catch in the dark, the Peugeot took off with a squeal of tires. During the journey to their tent — where they were indeed heading, she was relieved to see — Desai alternately stamped on the accelerator and braked abruptly, shouting something over his shoulder about 'drifts'. Helen couldn't see any such thing and jarred her head against the window trying to. This bump on her brow, and the seesaw motion of her body as the car slowed and leapt ahead and slowed unpredictably stopped her from solving the riddle of the lock.

"Have you ever slept with native girls, Mister Harry?" enquired Desai conversationally. "No, of course you haven't. They're filth. We Asians like white skin. Stupid Europeans, lying on beaches burning yourselves black!"

By now their own VW was framed by the headlights; and there stood the tent next to it. This time Desai braked as though he had spotted a crevasse opening up in front of his Peugeot. Stretching over, he flipped the passenger door open and fairly bundled Harry out. Before Helen knew what was happening the Peugeot sped off again, throwing her back against the upholstery. The open door where Harry had sat swung wildly to and fro as Desai raced the car onward through scanty bush, swerving to avoid trees and termite mounds.

"Now you won't be bored, Madam!" The driver laughed. "Desai's little joke, this."

"I want to go back *now,*" she cried in anger. She tried to supress the panic of her body, uncertain how far Desai intended to carry his joke; or whether he might not simply be driving her round in a big circle back to their tent, to frighten her into making a fool of herself.

"Take me back now," she said sternly.

"Soon, soon, Madam. Don't panic yourself."

The headlight beams bounced across the termite heaps, thick pencils of hardest stone; across great bovine skulls with horns; across burnt

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treetrunks — none of which Desai hit, by a miracle. Perhaps he had driven like this many times, practicing? If she did solve the door lock and leap out, she would probably break a leg.

"First we're going to find leopard. Then I'll take you back to your fine husband, Madam."

Ahead there was fire. A licking wall of red flames. The flames weren't very high nor were they moving fast, though a sudden wind could whip them up. Then they would race away through the bush like a pack of athletes in red shirts. The fire wound through the bush in a snaking line, grazing on the straw, leaving a smoking black desert behind. Such a long line of fire! Desai steered deliberately close to the flames as if daring them to singe his tires. The mad jaws of the flames crackled audibly as they ate the land.

Abruptly Helen clutched over Desai's shoulder for the steering wheel, though she couldn't say what use there would be in catching hold of it, or wrenching it to left or right. Desai imprisoned her wrists in one big brown hand. Steering seesaw with his free hand he pulled Helen forward across the seat where Harry had been sitting.

"Don't touch me!" she cried.

Desai laughed in her face. "I know! I know what you're thinking."

"I'm not thinking that! Take me back!"

"You're not thinking what, Madam? Er, *stuffy* means dirty, doesn't it, kind of dirty?"

"It doesn't. You're wrong."

"So you say. But let's see a leopard, shall we?" He released her, and she drew back. "That's all I want to show you, then back we go, deliver you safe to your husband, eh?"

During this exchange, Desai had let the car wander. All of a sudden the fire was directly ahead: a narrow flower border crowded with red roses curving to right and left. Instead of braking or trying to swerve, Desai gunned the engine.

"Now sit still, Madam Helen, or your goose'll be cooked!"

Desai raced the Peugeot straight through the fire and braked sharply, upwind of the flames. Now the route back to the camp was blocked by a low wall of fire which only a very foolhardy woman wearing a light cotton dress would dream of skipping over. Desai switched off, though he left the headlights on. Pocketing the keys he jumped out and walked once around the Peugeot to inspect it. He held his hand down to the still-smoking earth to see how hot it was. Satisfied, he stuck his head through the driver's window. Helen had huddled into the rear of the car.

"I'm not such a fool, Madam Helen. I don't think I will *touch* you. Even my friend the German would be upset if I did such a foolish thing. But we won't see leopard here with this fire

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about, so I shall just take your picture a few times before we head back to your husband. In the nude, eh? I'll take your photograph with no clothes on, then I'll take you back. But I'll not take you back until."

"If that's your idea, we can sit here till dawn."

"No, that isn't my idea, Madam. My idea is that if you don't pose for your picture you can walk back yourself. No harm in pictures, Madam Helen."

"Stop calling me by that stupid name!"

"No one knows anything about these pictures except you and me, Madam Helen. And I will call you what I like. Why not slap my face? Ah, but you'd have to touch me then! And I might touch *you*."

"I'll report this to the Police. I will!"

"Have you tried reporting anything to the Police? They have such odd ways of looking at things. They mightn't be able to see any crime here, but they might think it was a crime for a government servant like your husband to be smoking bhang when he should be drawing up the budget. That's the way their brains work. Twenty-four hours notice! Pack your bags and get out! Take my word for it, they have simple minds."

And Desai lit a cigarette. He puffed it through cupped hands. His lips didn't touch the cigarette; they only touched his brown stained hands. With the cigarette held thus at right angles to his mouth, he sucked smoke out of his fist like a conjuror....

Desai considered Helen, in the headlight beams. Though he had insisted she remove her white socks along with everything else, he had let her step back into her sandals. After all, the soles of her feet weren't those of an African woman! They weren't horny pads impervious to thorns; and he mustn't injure Helen, not physically.

He examined her, naked in the hot burnt night, through his viewfinder. An auburn head of hair, cut short, haloed an oval face with startled, shamed eyes. Mascara like brown tears rimmed the lids. Her nose was small, her chin childishly dimpled. She shaved her armpits, but not her crotch. Her flesh was amber from visits to the beach, though albino bands cut across her bosom and her loins thanks to a bikini; this made her breasts seem larger and rather shapeless as though they spread out around her whole chest....

He frowned. "Not there! Away from the car! Nearer to the fire. I have flashbulbs."

"Have you?"

He motioned her impatiently; and she trod awkwardly towards the crackling line of flames. Odd, he thought, how ungaingly her stride became when she was reduced to bare essentials.

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"You don't walk very gracefully, Madam!"

"Don't I. What a pity."

"You couldn't carry a bundle of firewood on your head. But never mind! Stand there. Touch your toes then throw your arms right up in the air, high and wide."

"I didn't say I'd do tricks for you."

"Oh come on, Madam. I want good photos!"

The first flashbulb popped off, blinding Helen with white light. Then another, and a third. The radiance dazzled her. Glowing afterimages cavorted.

Suddenly, right in front of her, a scream tore the silence. A crashing, a growling violence! Then another piercing, deafening cry of agony, which bubbled away like sea-foam into sand. She staggered, though nothing had touched her except the noise.

Through the fading auras of exploding stars, picked out faintly by the flames behind and the backwash from the car's headlights, Helen saw Desai's body lying crumpled and torn on the black soil — and a great spotted cat astride him, shaking its head from side to side, thrashing its tail like a rope. Impossible! Impossible! No wild animal would ever rush in the direction of flames and flashbulbs!

She froze. She blinked frantically, to see.

A man straightened up from the corpse: an African man dressed in ragged trousers and a shirt so torn that it had become a waistcoat. She thought that the man's feet were thickly caked with soot and cinders till she realized that he was wearing sandals cut from old tire rubber. The man's right arm hung down as though he was gripping a panga in his hand, but in fact he was holding nothing; certainly no long blood-soaked blade. Yet Desai's body looked badly mauled.

The man approached her. She covered her crotch with both hands, as nonchalantly as she could. He stepped right up to her. She smelt sweet strong body odor. His eyes had milky webs inside them like strings of burst boiled egg in water.

"Who are you?" Her voice was feeble. "*U nani?*"

"We almost met earlier today, *Memsahib*. I am chui, the leopard."

"We almost met? What do you mean?"

"I was running along the road. Now I have caught up with you."

"What?" she gasped.

"*Hapo zamani palikuwa na mtu, Memsahib*...." It was the traditional way a tale began. He continued in English. "Long ago there was a man, who was knocked down on that road by a driver who did not stop. So I lay there, hurt, and a leopard found me. And ate me. So I became the leopard. Now no one can catch me when I run. But I was always good at running, *Memsahib*. I won the rickshaw races quite often."

"Rickshaw races?"

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"Oh yes. In the old days, which are not so long ago, the white *Bwanas* used to get drunk, and when they got drunk they would spill out of the bar of the New African Hotel to organize the Great Rickshaw Race — from the New Africa all the way along the harbor front to the railway station then back again. The native who could pull the hardest and run the fastest would win five shillings — a little fortune!"

"Oh my God ... This is madness."

"Madness? Not so. Madness is having your soul caught in a cage. That man was catching your soul."

"By taking my picture? No, that's nonsense. Why, even the Masai sell you the right to take their photo for a shilling or two. They don't mind."

"Yes! With your nakedness pictured in his collection, he would always have owned you."

"Maybe just a little bit ... till I left the country."

"Always! He would have been gloating over you constantly, showing you to his friends. You would have felt your soul touched, in England or America."

"What are you? Are you human?"

"I told you, I am *chui.*"

"And it was really you we passed running along the road? It must have been — or how else could you have known? But we didn't stop. So why did you...?"

"Why did I kill this man for you?"

"It's out of proportion. He has a family. It's horrible. Is he truly dead?"

"His veins and nerves are torn by my filthy claws. His throat is bitten through. This way, *Memsahib, I* have caught your soul, not him. Wherever you go to in the world, I can always find you."

"All because we didn't stop. That's out of proportion too."

"It was a sign to me, of a million other things."

"If we *had* stopped...."

"Ah, but you didn't! You would never wish to stop. But you wished that this man's heart would stop and he would fall down dead. All to save your shame. Your white spotless pride. White as the excrete of diseased dogs."

"What do you want? What should I do?"

"Clean yourself. You're unclean. You have pissed yourself. Your urine has run down your legs."

Helen realized that this was true. "You're *worse* than him," she shouted. "Much more worse."

He laughed. "Why did you ever come to this country? That's what you're thinking now. And I say: why indeed?"

"To help. I came to help."

"No. You came to *use.* You use so many things: cars, refrigerators, electricity, oil, roads, gin, whiskey. You need them all. And you use so many people. By coming here, you use Africa. Then home you go again with the spoils: the pictures, the carvings, the zebra skin drums, the bonus and

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the happy memories of servants. And you bind us to you also, with your things: your used clothes, your used money, your trash." He leaned even closer. "One day, *Memsahib,* all your things will *burn,* just as the grass burns here. But nothing new will sprout. Your land and your air and your water will be poison. I see it! You will be burnt one day, along with England and America. But I have caught your soul. So you will come back here to the womb. I shall make you be born, as a little shy dik-dik or a zebra foal. Then I will hunt you till I catch you — and eat you. Then your flesh will repay what you have taken from us. Just wait for the fire that comes, *Memsahib!*"

Helen fainted.

When she roused, the African was gone. Her body was hot and sooty from lying where she had sprawled. Her legs were sticky where she had wet them. She scrambled up. The car headlights still glared. The line of fire hadn't moved far. Desai's body lay brokenly, his camera nearby.

Nerving herself, she darted close to him and seized the camera. The film inside! She tried to release it but the camera was unfamiliar. Besides, she realized that she was smearing ashen fingerprints all over. So she ran back to the line of flames, braving the heat as closely as she dared, and tossed the camera where it would burn, be fused, disfigured. Then she walked back to the Peugeot, fumbled for her underclothes and dress, put them on.

There was no key in the ignition. No: it would be in the dead man's pocket. She hesitated. She couldn't bear to go back and touch him. Anyway, she mustn't take his car.

She walked away at random through the night. After a while, off to her right, she heard a throaty growl. Hastily she changed direction. But she mustn't run; she mustn't run.

A softer growl came from her left ... correcting her.

As she walked through the blackness, the faint pat of padding paws accompanied her.

She couldn't understand why the camp was so dark and silent when she reached it. Surely that German hunter should be out searching? Surely the Asians' tent ought to show a light? Surely *Harry*...?

She made her way to their tent, with the VW parked beside it.

The flap was unzipped.

"Harry? Harry!"

"Eh?" Sudden commotion in the darkness inside. A flashlight snapped on, dazzling her. Quickly this was redirected towards the paraffin lamp, which Harry lit fumblingly.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Helen, are you all right?"

"What were you doing?" she demanded. "Why didn't you—?"

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"Me? I passed out.... It was the bhang." He spoke falteringly, and groaned faintly — as though to convince her that he was genuinely groggy.

"You mean you went to bed?"

He gestured. "I'm still dressed. Look, aren't I?"

"So you went to bed dressed."

"If I'd driven after you ... well, I didn't know which way he'd gone. So I waited. And I passed out. You *are* all right, love?"

"Do I look all right? So you made no effort to tell the German, hmm!"

"I didn't know.... I mean...."

"You don't mean anything. Not to me."

"I thought you'd both be back in a few minutes. I didn't want to make a fuss too soon. I was *drugged*."

She laughed bitterly. "Then so was I. Did that send *me* to sleep?"

"What happened?" Harry stared at Helen's soiled legs and arms. "He didn't —? If he did, I'll—!"

"Desai's dead."

"What?"

"A leopard killed him."

"Oh God."

Helen sat on her bed. Harry moved to put an arm around her, but she thrust him away. "Get off! Don't touch me."

"Are you sure Desai didn't—?"

"*He* didn't do anything, you fool! Nothing important. He just died."

"You're upset about his death. The shock. That's natural."

"*Natural?*" she snarled. "What's natural?"

"Darling, you're safe. We've got to...." Got to what? Harry wasn't quite sure. "We've got to pull ourselves together. Have you told anyone? Does anyone else know yet?"

"And if they don't, shall we pack our bags and drive away right now in the middle of the night? Drive, drive! then no one will be any wiser?"

At least, thought Harry, Helen was still speaking. It wasn't his fault that he'd succumbed.

"No, but we could say that Desai delivered us both back safely, then drove off on his own. That way, we aren't involved."

Said Helen, "I think that I left my socks in his car."

"You did *what?* Why did you take your socks off?"

"I must have been hot, mustn't I?"

"You aren't serious!" Harry's tone was accusatory now.

"Well, it must have been the bhang, then. If you want us not to get involved, you'll have to go and fetch my socks, won't you?" Yes, she thought, the Police would find her socks. Or maybe not. Maybe no one would wonder about a pair of socks.

"You mean, drive out there now, to his car? You'd have to show me where. Someone might notice us starting our car and going for a night drive."

"So you'll have to walk — the same way I walked back. At least you'll

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have a flashlight with you."

Harry swallowed. Was this a test of love? A way to redeem his failure, the fact that he'd slept?

"*I* don't know the way, damn it! I can't just wander round in the bush all night ... How far is it?" It occurred to him then that Desai's car might be close by.

"I've no idea."

"It's ridiculous. Impossible."

"Nothing's impossible," said Helen. "If I know one thing, I know that!" She crossed to the water bucket and quickly washed the ash smuts from her arms and legs. "I'm going to bed now. Make your own mind up." Turning her back on Harry, she undressed, slid into the camp bed and turned her face to the wall.

Harry fretted for several minutes. He turned the paraffin lamp down lower.

"Are you asleep?" he whispered.

No response. Helen lay unmoving and silent.

"Shall I go?"

No answer.

Harry doused the lamp entirely. With flashlight in hand, he parted the flaps of the tent and stood out in the night, feeling sick. "Oh damn it, damn it," he swore softly. He could at least go as far as the toilet tent....

Urrrngg....

A low growl in the darkness! He flashed the light-beam around. Two low-set eyes reflected the light momentarily. Beast eyes. He couldn't see the shape behind the eyes.

He backed into the tent and zipped the flaps, then lay down on his own bed, listening. He imagined claws ripping through the canvas wall beside him, and gripped the torch tight. Strike the leopard on its nose, he thought. The noses are sensitive.

Something moved outside. Something brushed the tent. Harry lay rigid, sweating coldly. He lay for an immeasurable time, wide-awake. Ultimately the torch battery began to weaken. Eventually he fell asleep.

"It's light!" he cried, sitting upright in a rush. "It's dawn!"

"Unh?" Helen turned over.

He shook her shoulder. "It's dawn, love."

She opened her eyes, but didn't focus. "What?"

"I said it's dawn."

"I'm tired. I'm going to stay in bed."

"But you can't.... We told Frau Boll we'd be going out in the Land Rover this morning. If we don't...."

"I'm not going. Stop bothering me."

In despair, Harry went to unzip the flaps. How could he persuade — no, *beg* — Helen to act normally?

The African dawn assailed him: light, air, emptiness, vastness, a faint drift of smoke, calls of nameless birds. Barren hills, trees, clouds.

At his feet just outside the tent lay a pair of white socks side by side.

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He stooped and seized them. 'She brought them back with her after all!' was his first thought. 'The bitch, oh the bitch!'

But this didn't figure. When he had stepped outside with the flashlight the night before, no socks had lain there. Maybe Desai wasn't dead at all. Maybe *he* had returned her socks. Maybe what Harry feared, had indeed happened!

Then why should Helen have lied about a leopard killing him? It didn't make sense — none of it. Only the socks made a kind of sense. They at least were tangible. They were right here in his hand, like a gift from providence. He went inside, shook Helen brusquely, dangled the socks before her eyes.

"I have them," he said. "Here they are."

She sat bolt upright, then gathered the sheet to her breasts. "You fetched them? You did?"

"I have them," he repeated cautiously. "These are your socks."

"Yes, they are."

"So we're all right now."

"Are we? Is that what you think?"

"Please get ready. We have to be at the Land Rover. Then back for breakfast afterwards. We must act normally."

Helen considered. "All right. Go to the toilet or something while I get dressed. Take a walk."

He did. He went nowhere near the Asian's tent, which was still silent. The African Boy was about, though, doing his early morning jobs.

The German hunter, Herr Boll, looked like one of Rommel's desert captains, somewhat aged; and maybe he had been, too. He spoke English with a perfect exactness daunting to native English speakers, making their own normal use of the language seem slovenly by comparison. But he carried no gun in the Land Rover, since he was only a hunter on rare occasions.

Apart from Helen and Harry, a Canadian diplomat and his wife and two Italian men rode out to the reedy waterhole some miles away.

Warthogs were about, and giraffes; a few wildebeest, a solitary elephant, a small pride of lions.

On the return journey Helen spotted Desai's white Peugeot standing solitary on the plain in the distance.

As did Boll. "I wonder what our Indian friend has found," he said. "We shall take a look." He turned the Land Rover off the track and headed across country.

"*Gott,*" muttered the hunter, a few minutes later. "Everyone will please stay here. Do not get out of the vehicle." He walked the last fifty yards.

"There has been an accident," he said when he returned.

"What is it?" twittered the Canadian woman, raising her camera.

"An accident. Please do not take photographs."

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"A man is lying there," said one of the Italians.

"Yes, I know." Boll engaged gear and drove off, dust pluming in their wake.

"An accident," Harry said to Helen softly. "An *accident*." He stressed the word. It said plainly that they had nothing, and could not possibly have had anything, to do with it. He glanced down at Helen's feet. She was wearing those same socks, which didn't look too dirty. Harry tried to tell himself that they had always been on her feet, safely inside her sandals.

Later, since they had only booked into Mikumi Camp for one night, Helen and Harry drove off. A police Land Rover had arrived from Morogoro, but this had nothing to do with them. If Desai's family had mentioned the meal and the proposed leopard hunt, this mustn't have seemed to matter; and Harry avoided going over to the Asians' tent. Desai, after all, had hardly even been an acquaintance.

They drove back in the direction of the coast in silence along the main road, through the dust-storms of oil trucks till they reached the hard-top stretch. Then they sped faster.

Just short of Morogoro, an African man tried to flag them down. He was old, wizened, rather neatly dressed.

Harry broke their long silence to suggest, "Maybe we should—?" He even slackened off the accelerator.

"Don't stop," Helen said coldly. "Don't ever stop. I hate this country. I want to leave."

"What? But I have a three-year contract...." Harry's words sounded phoney, almost rehearsed.

"You do. I don't. I want to leave; I want to fly home."

"Be reasonable."

"Reason has gone away," she said. "There only seems to be reason. There's madness. And shame. And death. And ghosts."

"I don't understand you."

"No, you don't. That's true."

Something was puttering inside the engine at the back of the car. To Helen's ears this sounded like the pad of feet pacing the car, pursuing it effortlessly. It was a sound she feared she would always hear.

"My socks smell like an animal's mouth," she said. "Do you know why?"

"No."

"Because you didn't bring them back. The leopard brought them back for me last night."

Harry couldn't answer. He knew that he would never be able to answer such a statement. Yet somehow he knew too, in this moment, that he had escaped — whereas Helen hadn't escaped. Even if she carried out her threat to leave him, to pack her bags and be gone on the next week's flight, she wouldn't escape from whatever possessed her now. But he would be free of it. Free of hate.

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All of a sudden he felt bitterly glad. He tried to detach himself further, by squaring his shoulders and pressing down on the accelerator.

Already he suspected that after their divorce he might marry an African woman. Miss Nsibambi, yes. Why not? She was a graduate in economics but she had to work for the Ministry during her first three years after graduation at National Service pay rates, to help this poor country with its nation building. So her life was difficult; but she was beautiful. And black. How dare Desai say that about black girls! Desai was a racialist.

After Helen had gone, Harry would take Miss Nsibambi to the cinema and buy her dinners of Malayan lobster curry on the roof restaurant of the Twiga Hotel. He would identify more deeply with Africa. Then when his contract was up, he would take the black Mrs. Sharp away with him and she would be happy to go — happier than Helen had been to come, in the event.

With the experience of one marriage behind him, the next one should work out much better. And whilst he remained in this country, with Miss Nsibambi he would be safe.

Beside him, Helen cocked her head attentive to some sound he couldn't hear, yet.

He wondered what it would be like to make love to an African woman. He would have to leave the light on, to know. To lighten her ebony darkness.

He drove a little faster, to bring this future closer.

Twenty miles further on, he reached for Helen's hand, knowing in advance that she would jerk it away. Which she did.

"If *that's* how you feel," he snapped.

Ahead, another African man danced right out on to the road to wave for a lift. This man was raggy, his sandals cut from old car tires.

"Why, he's just like—!" Harry checked himself.

"Run him down," said Helen. "Run — him — down!"

"But I can't possibly—!" She was insane. Quite insane. Run the man down? That would wreck everything. Miss Nsibambi would never marry him then.

"It's the only thing you can ever do for me! Run him down!"

The closer they approached, the more the man thrashed his arms about and grinned and nodded. Harry angled the car out to pass the man. He was only fifty yards ahead.

Suddenly Helen grabbed the wheel and wrenched it over. The car slewed. Harry was aware of it striking the man. Then they were skidding off the road, turning right over. The world went black.

Voices, speaking Swahili. A stink of petrol. Harry's head ached fiercely as the hands pulled him up and out through the window. Blurred, he saw

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two oil trucks parked. Before the hands lifted him clear he looked down, saw Helen, the blood on her face, the angle of her neck.

As the two African drivers laid him down on the warm soil he shivered in the aftermath of shock. Then he calmed; relaxed. It was over —and all so soon. And he would be pitied. Miss Nsibambi especially would pity his loneliness, and admire the way he worked on despite bereavement.

Or was that only the angry fantasy of a quarrel? Marry Miss Nsibambi: what sort of delusion was that?

Helen and I would have got over it, he thought. We'd have made it up. Now we can't. Not ever.

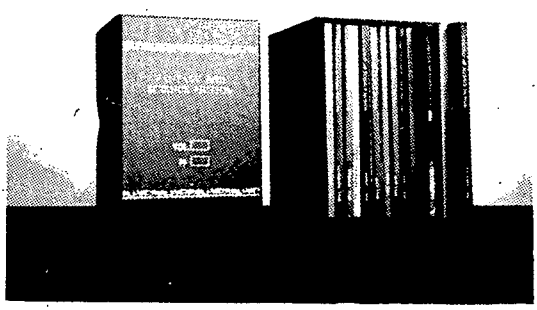
"Man on road," he said in bad Swahili to one of his rescuers. "How he?"

"*Hapana mtu,*" said the African. "No man on road. Only you and *Memsahib* here.

"*Hapana mtu,*" his rescuer repeated.

Harry began to feel afraid.

Away in the bush, a zebra foal was born. Licked by its mother, it staggered on to its legs which were frail and rickety as yet. Unlike the other zebras, this foal's hooves and fetlocks were an unbroken snowy white, for all the world like ankle socks. Its nostrils sucked the amazing air. Its ears pricked up, when it heard a far-off growl — as though it had always known that noise.



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That science fiction's most famous year is also an election year has not gone unnoticed by Mr. Malzberg, who offers this mordant and compressed tale.

1984

BY

BARRY N. MALZBERG

"I'm afraid something's wrong," Callendar said. "It's a perfect model. I did everything right. But now, look."

Indeed, something *had* gone wrong. Peeering through the glass I could see the model failing; from the heads of miniaturized dead politicians brains hung like damp clay; in the miniaturized inner cities crowds tore at one another while tiny militia fired shots into the throngs: out in the pastoral farmlands the haze of pollutants and fallout like expectorant hung over the misshapen, staggering forms.

"I don't understand why," Callendar said, "it was a first-rate microcosm."

"You're a beginner," I said, "and these things will happen. Subtle mismatching of components, a failure to rigorously purify." I shrugged, made a note. "Put it down."

He stared at me. "But it was such a beautiful model. Just let me make a few adjustments; I can bring it back to balance."

"You know the course stipulation. Put it down at once."

Callendar looked away unhappily. We could hear the thin shrieks from the little abbatoir. This is often a sad affair; student work gives great pain. "It could have been great," he said, "I'm emotional; it's my first."

"And if you don't dismantle," I said, "it will be your last." I touched the appropriate lever. "Must I?"

"Maybe they could work out on their own. Couldn't it be self-correcting?"

"Take them out of their misery," I said sternly.

I could see his hatred unshrouded for an instant. Then he shrugged and pressed the electoral lever.

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In which we continue Damon Knight's thriller about the remarkable events on board the remarkable floating construction known as CV. If you missed part one, see the author's synopsis, or send us $2.00, and we'll rush you a copy of the January issue.

CV

(part two)

BY

DAMON KNIGHT

SYNOPSIS OF PART 1

In the year 1998, a floating construction called Sea Venture, or CV for short, is on its second voyage around the North Pacific Gyre, a system of ocean currents that will take CV from San Francisco to Hawaii, Guam, the Phillipines, Hong Kong, Tokyo, and back to its starting point. Sea Venture is not a ship; it is a "Prototype Ocean Sea Habitat," intended as a possible alternative to colonies in space. It has no propulsion except for "windstacks" that add a little to its speed; it is submersible and uses undersea currents for steering.

Among the passengers and crew are Stanley Bliss, the chief controller, an ex-Cunard man; Jim Woodruff, a retired auto dealer, and his wife, Emily; Paul Newland, a guru of the L-5 movement, who has been having second thoughts about space, and John Stevens, a professional assassin, assigned to kill Newland.

Newland and his nurse-companion, Hal Winter, are given a tour of the "perm section," where the permanent residents of Sea Venture live, by Ben Higpen, the mayor. They also visit the marine science section, where Randy Geller shows them a manganese nodule dredged up from the ocean floor. When Geller cracks the nodule, he discovers that it contains an australite, a kind of hollow glass meteorite. The australite is cracked, too, and something invisible escapes from it.

A day later Geller collapses and is attended by Dr. Wallace McNulty, the resident physician. McNulty is baffled by Geller's symptoms. The next victim is Yvonne Barlow, Geller's boss in the marine section; then

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a steward, Luis Padilla.

The thing that has escaped from the australite is an intelligent energy creature that lives as a symbiote in the brains of other organisms. It cannot communicate with its hosts, or influence their actions directly, but it can make certain simple improvements in the electrical networks of their brains. Each new victim feels a momentary faintness when the symbiote enters it; when the symbiote leaves, the victim collapses.

Inhabiting the brain of Julie Prescott, a passenger, the symbiote experiences her sensations when Stevens makes love to her. Stevens becomes the next victim, followed by Paul Newland.

Another victim, Mrs. Malcolm Claiborne, knows that she has been invaded by the symbiote, and leaves her husband in order to avoid infecting him. She wanders in the lower decks until after midnight, then goes to the deserted Sports Deck, where she meets Norman Yeager, a computer technician, who lets her stay in his room. In the morning, when the maid enters, Mrs. Claiborne collapses.

Finding that Newland is convalescing in the next room, Stevens is amused enough to strike up a friendship with him. Stevens no longer knows whether he wants to kill Newland or not, and he is intrigued by the thought that Newland's life hangs on an essentially whimsical decision of his own.

Ten days after the beginning of the "epidemic," the first victims begin to recover. McNulty tells Bliss, "I think we're out of the woods." But he is wrong.

Disturbing personality changes begin to show up in the recovered victims. Geller goes back to the marine lab, discovers that he no longer believes in what he is doing, and walks out, slugging a co-worker on the way. A steward, Luis Padilla, steals some jewelry from a passenger. Incidents of violence begin to mount; panic is growing in Sea Venture.

Emily Woodruff, who has a history of mental illness, begins to hear a creaking sound whenever she is near the host of the symbiote. The sound is associated in her mind with her dead son, Danny, who was killed while playing with his favorite toy, an abandoned grocery cart. Geller and Yvonne Barlow, who has also left the marine lab, suggest that McNulty use Emily to identify the host, then knock him out with a hypodermic and quarantine him. Reluctantly McNulty follows this advice.

Three days later the quarantined man, Roger Cooke, goes into convulsions. When McNulty enters the room with a nurse, the symbiote escapes. Cooke is dead.

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McNulty finished out his workday, went home, took a couple of

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Nembutals, and went to sleep. He woke up in the morning with the clear recollection of what had happened and the knowledge that he could no longer call himself fit to practice medicine. He had broken the oldest rule in the book: "The regimen I adopt shall be for the benefit of my patients according to my ability and judgment, and not for their hurt or any wrong."

He discovered that the knowledge of his guilt was only what he had always suspected. If this had been Santa Barbara, he could have walked out of the door. But it wasn't. For better or worse, McNulty was the only medical doctor on Sea Venture, and there were still things he had to do. He made up his mind that he would do them to the best of his ability — brilliantly, if possible — and then he would try to figure out what, if anything, was left of his life.

Cooke's body was on ice down in a corner of the freezer section. His family had been notified. They had been offered the option of burial at sea, if they so desired, but they wanted the body shipped home. By rights there would be an inquiry. McNulty was guilty of malpractice — or of murder, if you looked at it that way — but the worst thing he was guilty of, the thing he could not forgive himself, was stupidity.

On the following day he began a systematic effort to locate and interview all the recovered patients. Jamal A. Marashi, the man who had struck his wife, was a Malaysian living in the United States. He seemed to McNulty an entirely selfish person; his grievances against his wife took up most of the conversation. McNulty put him down as inconclusive; for all he knew, Marashi had been exactly the same before his illness.

Luis Padilla, the steward, was another matter. At first he seemed very much at ease; he denied that he had taken any jewelry from Mr. and Mrs. Emerton, and pointed out that his record was unblemished.

"Mr. Padilla," McNulty said, "I'm a medical man, not a policeman. I don't care whether you took that stuff or not. What I'm trying to find out is, What does this disease do to people? Could you just tell me, did you feel any different after you got well? We won't talk about the jewels at all."

Padilla shifted uneasily. "Different? Well, maybe a little different."

"Could you tell me how?"

"Well, you know, how I think about things."

"Yes?"

Padilla seemed to make up his mind. "Doctor, you know, I am a Filipino. Our country was conquered by your country a hundred years ago. First your country says after they drive the Spaniards away, they will give us our independence. Then they change their minds, no, the Philippines is our country now. Our national hero, Aguinaldo, you have heard of him?"

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"No," said McNulty. "I'm sorry."

Padilla smiled. "He was the leader of the independence movement. He fought many battles. The U.S. government defeated him only by treachery."

"I see," McNulty said. "So you feel different now about Americans?"

"Not about you, Doctor," said Padilla politely. "I think you are a good man. But I know what Americans did to my country, and I think it is important for us to have pride."

"And you started thinking this way after you got well?"

"Yes." Padilla shrugged and smiled. "You want to know, why not before? I don't know why. I think maybe I listened too long to people who say, Keep in your place. Remember the Americans are boss. I don't know, but I believe the way I think now is better."

Mrs. Morton Tring turned up with the friend, Alice Gortmacher, with whom she had been staying since she left her husband. Mrs. Tring was a handsome woman in her early fifties; Ms. Gortmacher was smaller, darker, and more intense. "If you ***think,***" she said, "you're going to get Susan to go back to that man, you're very much mistaken."

"No, no," said McNulty, "that isn't it at all. Believe me, Mrs. Tring—"

"Ms. Coleman," she said; "I'm taking my maiden name back."

"Ms. Coleman, then. I'm just interested to know if you experienced any change of feeling after you were ill. Did your outlook change, the way you looked at things?"

"It certainly did," put in Ms. Gortmacher. "She saw for the first time what a monster she was married to."

"Is that right, Ms. Coleman?"

"Yes, well — It's not exactly that, Alice. I mean, I knew what Mort was like, but suddenly it just seemed to me that I stayed with him for all the wrong reasons."

"What sort of reasons?" McNulty asked.

"Well, you know, the usual things. The children. Mort's career. What would people say, et cetera. And then, I suppose, I was afraid, too. What would happen if I divorced Mort and went off on my own? I still don't know."

"Yes, you do," said Ms. Gortmacher, patting her hand. "Yes, you do."

Ms. Coleman put her hand on her friend's. "Alice is going to take me into her business," she said. "She's the dearest friend I ever had, and I don't know what I'd do without her. But even if I didn't have Alice, I'd do the same thing — I'd leave Mort."

"Can you tell me what it was that changed your mind about that?"

She hesitated. "Well, this may sound silly, but I woke up one morning, a few days after I got well, and Mort was snoring, and I just asked myself, What am I doing here? And I looked at all the reasons, and they weren't good enough. So I got up and got dressed, and called Alice, and just went."

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"Ms. Coleman," said McNulty, "how many married women do you suppose there are who would feel the way you do, if they just thought it over?"

She glanced away for a moment. "Four out of five," she said.

"More," said Ms. Gortmacher firmly.

And, McNulty thought, she might well be right. He sympathized entirely, but what would happen to the world if the divorce rate climbed to 90 percent? If only couples who liked being together stayed together? Or if only those who knew themselves to be fit for the practice of medicine ever became doctors?

32

Randall Geller and Yvonne Barlow, wearing dark glasses and sipping tall drinks, were lying side by side in lounge chairs near the pool, looking out across the bright ocean. Their bathing suits were almost dry. "What do you want to do next?" Barlow asked.

"Dunno. Go watch the geriatrics play shuffleboard?"

"Or sit here all day?"

"I can do with a lot of sitting here." Geller hoisted his tall glass and drank.

"Not worried about boredom?"

"Hell, no. You know what I dreamed about last night?"

"No."

"I dreamed I had the solution to the problem of sexuality."

"That sounds boring."

"It was very exciting. You know, why did bisexuality ever arise? You've got the Best Man theory, the Red Queen theory, the Tangled Banks theory, none of them work. I had it all figured out, but I forgot it."

"Maybe it was just for fun," Barlow said lazily.

"Well, why not? Pleasure is a survival factor — if it weren't, we wouldn't have it."

"There's a circular argument if I ever heard one. Do you think a spider gets a kick from building a web?"

"No opinion," said Geller.

"Well, if you were going to design a machine to build webs, would you put pleasure into the circuit or not?"

"Oh, God."

"No, you wouldn't, because number one, it wouldn't be necessary; and number two, you wouldn't know how to do it; and number three, if you did do it, it would be counterproductive. A spider that built webs for kicks might get bored and quit. Spiders just go ahead and build them."

"Uh-huh. You remember the elevator operator in *Brave New World?*" Geller mimicked a voice trembling with ecstacy: " 'Up, up!' " Then misery and despair: " 'Down, down!' "

"So when was the last time you saw an elevator operator?"

"Um."

They sat in peaceful silence; then

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Barlow said, "You ever know anybody who was rich?"

"No."

"I did — a girl I went to school with. Her parents left her umpty million dollars."

"What's her address?"

"She wouldn't look at you twice," Barlow said. "Anyway, O.K., she's been married three times, she doesn't have to do a thing she doesn't want to do, and she's really a failed human being. Can you imagine life as one long birthday party? She knows she blew it, and she does't know what to do about that, and she's very unhappy."

"Tough," said Geller. "That's very tough."

"Sure it is. Suppose you didn't want to do anything except watch television and go to football games?"

"Paradise," said Geller.

There was a buzz from Barlow's beach bag. She reached over, extracted the phone. "Hello, Doctor."

The phone quacked at her.

"Who else would be calling us?... We could, but we probably won't.... If you want to talk, why don't you come up here? We're at the Sports Deck pool ... come up if you want to." She put the phone away.

"Now why did you do that?" said Geller.

"Why not? Good for your boredom."

McNulty showed up a few minutes later, interrupting a spirited argument. "Good old doc," said Geller. "Sit down, have a drink."

"Not during working hours, thanks," said McNulty, pulling over a web chair. "It's nice up here, isn't it? I can't remember the last time— Well, anyway, I just wanted to tell you, I've been interviewing some of the other recovered patients, and there's a pattern, all right. Marriages breaking up. People leaving their jobs. I keep thinking, maybe the parasite doesn't know what it's doing to us. If only we could talk to it."

"Well," said Barlow thoughtfully, "you know, we can. That's not the problem. Look, we're assuming the thing is intelligent and it understands what we say. So we can talk to it all we want to; the only thing is, it can't talk to us, or won't."

"Which is it?" McNulty asked. "Randy?"

Geller shifted restlessly in his chair. "How the hell do I know?"

"While you were infected—"

"Infested," Geller muttered.

"— did you ever feel that your actions were being controlled in any way?"

"Are you kidding?" Geller got up, his face set.

"Randy," said Barlow.

"Oh, for God's sake."

"Do it for me. This is interesting. Come on."

Geller sat down sulkily. "It's all bullshit."

"What he means is, the answer is no."

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"I can tell him what I mean, Yvonne."

"So tell him."

"The answer is no," said Geller. "Not just maybe or perhaps or a little bit. I know that for sure, because while I had the parasite, I did just what I would have done anyway. Look, use your brain. Here you are, you're a thing from another planet or God knows where, and you've never seen people before, or walls, or toothpicks, or coffee cups. If you could control the person you're in, what would you do? You'd walk it around and look at everything. If you could make a person talk, you'd ask questions. Then you'd have your wish."

"He means you could have a conversation with it," Barlow said. "And he's right. As far as I can tell, I didn't do or say a thing that I wouldn't have said on an ordinary day. So I think we're justified in assuming, the way we have before, that if the thing doesn't do something, it's because it can't."

"Would you both agree," McNulty asked delicately, "that your attitudes changed after the parasite left you?"

"Sure."

"Yvonne, you, too?"

"Of course. I suddenly saw I wasn't doing what I wanted to do with my life, so I quit."

"What do you want to do with your life?"

"I want to have some fun, and find out things, and do something that makes sense."

"O.K. But you know it must have been the parasite that changed your mind."

"True."

"And you like that."

"Sure, I like it."

"Don't you have to ask yourself — being objective, now — if you would have liked the idea of having your mind changed, if you'd known it was going to happen?"

"That doesn't matter," Geller broke in. "Come on, you know you can't argue that one way or the other. Either we're crazy now or we were dumb before. I say we were dumb before."

"So you think the thing did you a favor?"

"A favor?" said Geller. "Maybe." He gnawed a fingernail. "Interesting question. Might be just a by-product of the parasite-host relationship. Or maybe it's a symbiote, not a parasite — it gives you something for what it gets, like a bacteria in your gut."

Barlow was nodding. "I think that's right."

"So you'd definitely say it doesn't intend us harm, basically?"

"Right."

"Even though it makes everything fall apart?"

"What do you mean everything?"

"Well, the marine lab, for instance. You both walked off your jobs. What would happen if everybody walked off their jobs?"

"I don't give a damn about their

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stupid jobs. Look, McNulty, I know you think I'm a brainwashed idiot, but that's your problem. Take a good look at the things people do for a living and ask yourself how many of them are worth doing. How many people go through their whole goddamn lives screwing part A onto part B?"

"So you think the best thing to do would be to spread this around? Let the parasite get onto the mainland?"

"No."

McNulty glanced at Barlow, then leaned back and folded his hands. "Now, isn't there a little bit of contradiction there?"

"Think, McNulty. The system works because most people are dumb. That doesn't mean I have to be dumb."

"I see. And you don't feel any obligation to help make the system work? Even though you're in trouble if it doesn't?"

"No. The system will probably collapse. We'll get a new system. It might be a better one."

Next morning Emily Woodruff was wheeled into the hospital annex; she had collapsed in the Quarterdeck Breakfast Shop. McNulty looked at her and wondered if that was coincidence. Had the parasite deliberately sought her out, so they couldn't play that trick again?

33

In the name of the emergency, and with a sense of profound relief, Bliss had canceled all his formal entertainments, but the curious result was that time hung heavy on his hands in the evenings. In the ample space of his living room, intended for jolly cocktail parties of thirty or more, he felt himself isolated, almost imprisoned. He could not invite any of the VIP passengers without having to listen to their complaints all over again, and as for the staff, he saw all he wanted of them during the day. The only ones he could talk to were Dr. McNulty, who as a professional man did not exactly come under the heading of staff, and Captain Herman, who was neither staff nor passenger.

After dinner that night in Bliss's suite, McNulty told them about his interviews with the recovered patients, particularly Geller and Barlow. "As far as I can make out," he said, "the only principle they recognize is what you might call more or less enlightened self-interest. They're intelligent young people, and they're not exactly antisocial, but they just don't see the point of supporting a system they think is cockeyed."

"And that makes you uneasy?"

"Yes, it does. Maybe the system is cockeyed, but it seems to work. I've been thinking about that lately. Lots of the things we do aren't rational. Love isn't. Having babies isn't. 'Irrational' is a dirty word, but maybe it shouldn't be. This thing, this parasite, maybe it's a completely rational being, and it just doesn't understand that

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human beings don't work that way. You know what they say about the road to hell?"

"No, what do they say?"

"It's paved with good intentions."

After McNulty went home, Bliss brought out the chessboard. It was his turn to play white; he used a conventional Ruy Lopez opening. Hartman played for position, as usual, but Bliss developed an unorthodox queen's-side position that turned into an ingenious combination twenty moves later. Hartman smiled when he saw it. "Well done," he said and tipped over his king.

Afterward he accepted a whiskey and said, "You know, I think the doctor is right to be worried. The other day I had a talk in a bar with two gentlemen, both recovered patients and both veterans of the Nicaraguan War. They both said quite emphatically they wouldn't do it again."

"Did you ask them," said Bliss, "what if the U.S. were invaded?"

"I did, and they said they'd fight then if they had to, because they could see some point in it. By the way, I also talked to a recovered patient who'd spent twenty years in some giant corporation or other. He said if he had it to do over, he wouldn't do that again. After he retired he took up making stained glass, and now he says he's happy for the first time in his life."

"That's worrisome," Bliss said after a moment. "There are a good many things in life one doesn't particularly like to do; still, they've got to be done. Where would we be if everyone did just what they liked?"

"Wouldn't be any war, perhaps," Hartman said. "Nobody would go and fight for democracy, or Bolshevism, or the Holy Roman Empire."

"You have to fight sometimes."

"Quite right, to defend home and family, but that's where your enlightened self-interest comes in. As far as I can make out, these people would fight if they were attacked, but they wouldn't attack anybody else; they would see that as a foolish risk of their own necks. I don't suppose you've read Tuchman on the Hundred Years' War?"

"Can't say that I have."

"Well, read it sometime. You know, there was no earthly reason for that war unless you count things like wounded pride and stupidity. The French, especially. They wouldn't even use archers, thought it was beneath them, and we slaughtered them at Crécy."

"Oh, well, the French," said Bliss.

"We were no better, or not much. Think of the Wars of the Roses, or the Crusades."

"Well, it's not my line, but I suppose there must have been some wars that made sense — economic sense, anyhow. Expanding markets, and so on."

"Yes, certainly, but here you come

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back to the doctor's enlightened self-interest again. It was in the economic interest of some people in Germany to overrun Europe twice this century, but what about the poor sods who were in the trenches getting shot? Why did they do it? Weren't they pumped up with loyalty to the Fatherland?"

"I expect so. Afraid of their sergeants, more likely."

"All right, but how many sergeants would it take to stop a platoon if they decided to go home? That's my point, you see. If it weren't for loyalty, and these grand abstractions, you couldn't get people to fight in an ordinary war. They wouldn't let themselves be conscripted in the first place, and if they did, you couldn't keep them from deserting."

"It goes beyond war, though, doesn't it? We all have something to be loyal to, even if it's a shipping company."

Hartman sucked on his pipe meditatively. "I worked my way up in Cunard, same as you did. Thin times we had at first. I'm thinking of a steward I knew on the old *Queen*. They demoted him to staff service for some minor offense, and he was completely devastated. It wasn't just a job to him, it was his life. There's that, and then there's getting so accustomed to the thing that you can't imagine anything else. To me the interesting question is, Would there have been any shipping companies as we've known them, or any navies, if the ordinary seamen had been infected by this microbe or whatever it is? You know what Nelson said about them, that they were used up at thirty-five, half-dead with scurvy, couldn't eat their rations without agonizing pain. I can't help thinking that if we'd had seamen who consulted their own interests, the whole thing would have had to be organized in quite a different way."

"All right, but are you saying that things would be better if we didn't have any nations? Or religions, or anything?"

"I'm damned if I know."

That night, as he drifted off to sleep, McNulty had a fantastic vision. It was true, he realized, that they could communicate with the parasite. All they had to do was line up some prospective victims — gagged and bound, probably — and ask the parasite yes-no questions. Take Victim No. 1 if it's yes, Victim No. 2 if it's no. Or they could even set up an alphabet, with lettered cards on the victims' chests, like a human Ouija board. After all, it would be in the interest of research.

Toward morning he dreamed that he was on his way across the lobby to his office, and the lobby was full of children. They were sitting in rings in a conversation pit, playing some incomprehensible games; he could see their bright eyes and moving lips, although he couldn't hear a sound. They

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were beautiful children, every one; but when he got nearer, he could see that their faces were not human, and he woke up feeling as if he had been drenched in ice water. It was only a little after six, but he got up and dressed and went out into the lobby, just to make sure they were not there.

34

On Monday, at the Town Council meeting, Mrs. Bernstein said, "Item five. A complaint. Mrs. Livermore, will you state the complaint?"

Clarice Livermore stood up. "My complaint is, the Korngolds have let a couple from the passenger section move into that apartment they own at the corner of Fifth and Pacific. I didn't find out about it till they'd been here three days. That's right around the corner from our market, and it's only two blocks from the school."

"Are they disorderly people, Mrs. Livermore?"

"Well, I don't know, but that's not the point. They could be carrying that awful disease. Why can't they stay where they belong? I'm not the only one that feels this way," she said, and sat down.

"Mr. Korngold, do you want to respond?"

A stout gray-haired man in the audience stood up. "Mrs. Bernstein, gentlemen, the Harrises are old friends of ours, we've known them for twenty years. They're worried about the situation in the passenger section, and they asked us if they could move in till the trouble is over. I don't see how that's any of Mr. and Mrs. Livermore's beeswax."

"Well, my children's health is my business," cried Mrs. Livermore. "Let me tell you—"

Mrs. Bernstein rapped her gavel. "Out of order,' she said. "Mr. Korngold, do you have anything more to add?"

"No, that's it, except I think she's making a tempest out of a teapot."

"Any discussion?"

Ira Clark leaned forward. "Mrs. Livermore, is it just these two passengers you object to, or would you like to keep everybody from the passenger section out of perm? I hope you realize that I'm the only dentist on Sea Venture, and Dr. McNulty is the only physician."

"Well, that's one thing, but taking people that might be infected and bringing them in for no reason, that's another. That's all I say."

Higpen caught Mrs. Bernstein's eye and said, "You know, we have about a hundred people living here and working in passenger. There's traffic back and forth every day. If we could close off perm and keep the epidemic out, I'd be for it, but we've discussed this and agreed that it isn't possible. Luckily, there hasn't been a single case in perm, and the Harrises have been here, how long?"

"Since the first of last week," said

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Korngold from the audience.

"Well, I'd say if they were going to infect anybody, they would have done it by now. Sorry, Clarice. I move to dismiss the complaint."

"Further discussion?" asked Mrs. Bernstein. "All in favor." All the council members raised their hands. "You can step down, Mrs. Livermore. Item six, repairs to the gymnasium."

The next day Yetta Bernstein walked into the back room of Higpen's hardware store, where Higpen sat going over his accounts. "Ben, let's talk."

Higpen pointed to the plastic bag on his desk. "I was just about to have lunch."

"Bring it, we'll sit in the park. You ought to get out more anyway."

They walked to the park, an open space the same size as the town square. Children were running up and down the gravel paths, playing on the jungle gym. The scent of mown grass was sharp in the air.

"Ben, I'm worried," Bernstein said. "We've been lucky so far, the thing has stayed in the passenger section, but how long can we be lucky?"

"I don't know."

"I don't believe in trusting to luck. We've got to do something."

"All right, but what?"

They sat down on a park bench, and Higpen opened his lunch bag. "I've been thinking," Bernstein said. "The people who live here and work in passenger, maybe we could trim that number down. Talk them into staying here till the emergency is over. Or some of them, those that don't have families, they could stay in passenger."

"You'll never get them all that way."

"I know it, but we might be able to reduce the traffic to something manageable, say thirty or forty a day. Then suppose — just suppose — we station people at the entrances, and every time somebody comes in, we get another person to go with them and watch them for twenty-four hours."

"That wouldn't keep the parasite out." Higpen unwrapped a sandwich.

"No, but listen. Suppose it gets in, God forbid. All right. Then it leaves and goes to another person. The first person collapses, the second person feels faint. Now we know which person has the parasite. And we're watching. So we take that person back to passenger — maybe we tell them the truth, or maybe some cock-and-bull story — and that person doesn't get back in until the parasite jumps to somebody else."

Higpen took a bite, chewed, and swallowed. "You know," he said, "I feel two ways about this. Even if we could keep the parasite out, would it be fair? Why should the passengers take all the risks?"

"Ben, I'm ashamed of you. There are *children* here. Grown-ups can take

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their chances, but these kids?"

35

On Tuesday, at Bliss's invitation, Higpen and Bernstein attended the staff meeting. McNulty was also present; Geller and Barlow had been invited, but neither of them had shown up.

"Apart from the epidemic itself, I think it's fair to say that morale is our principal problem," Bliss said. "People are frightened, and some of them are behaving badly. Our head of security, Mr. Lundgren, isn't here because he can't leave the job, but speaking for him, I can say that the problem is out of hand. Our normal security staff, as you know, is only 10 people. We need at least 130. My deputies have been working with Mr. Lundgren when they're off shift, and we've got Mr. Islip, the entertainment director, and his staff, and about 50 staff from the restaurants and the casino, but it still isn't enough; we're overworking our people and falling behind."

Higpen said, "How many volunteers do you need? What kind of duty?"

"Well, we need at least a dozen for guard, and say eighty more for patrol."

"Will they be armed?"

"That's never been necessary. We don't have firearms in Sea Venture."

"What are they supposed to do if they have to subdue somebody and arrest them?" Mrs. Bernstein wanted to know.

"Mr. Young, our chief carpenter, has provided some batons. We'd like our patrolmen to work in pairs, in three shifts around the clock. We haven't got uniforms for them, of course, but we'll give them brassards. Then we'll need about twenty-five, they could be older men, for supervisory work."

"Or women?"

"Or women, of course. Thank you, Mrs. Bernstein."

"I wasn't volunteering, although I may yet. Mr. Bliss, are you exaggerating this in any way? I can't believe you need 130 policemen to keep order in the passenger section."

"Believe me, Mrs. Bernstein, if anything, I'm understating it. I had a delegation yesterday morning that nearly turned into a mob — some gentlemen demanding that we launch them in the lifeboats."

"You turned them down? Why not let them go and be rid of them?"

"I hope that was not a serious suggestion," said Bliss after a moment.

"Sea Venture is quarantined," said McNulty. "We can't take a chance of letting this thing spread."

"Why not, if you know it affects only one person at a time? Lock that person up and let the rest go. Mr. Bliss, for your information, that was a serious suggestion. I'd like to know what your plans are. You tell us Sea

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Venture is quarantined. I assume that means we can't land at Guam. What are we going to do, just keep on going until you've lost all your passengers?"

Bliss seemed incapable of speech. McNulty said quickly, "Mrs. Bernstein, please. We've already found out that we can't lock this thing up. What we're dealing with here isn't an ordinary infection, it's some kind of intelligent parasite."

"I don't believe in intelligent bacteria," said Bernstein.

"It isn't a bacteria," McNulty answered. "I don't know what it is. It's aware, it knows what we're doing, and it's outsmarted us every time. About the only thing we've got going for us is that it can't get off Sea Venture."

"So what are you going to do?" she demanded, looking at Bliss. "Just keep on drifting? Why aren't we getting help from the mainland?"

Higpen cleared his throat. "Yetta, we're getting overwrought. Mr. Bliss is responsible for the safety of CV, and I think we have to let him do his job. There's something else, too, talking about the lifeboats. This thing is infecting, what, about six to eight people a day?"

"About that," said McNulty.

"Well, so far it hasn't got into the perm section. If Mr. Bliss were to evacuate the passengers in lifeboats, where would it go for its victims except to us?"

"Good point," said Mrs. Bernstein. "But is there room on the lifeboats for everybody or not? Why not evacuate perms and passengers both?"

"Because," said Bliss, "then the parasite would be aboard one of the boats."

"All right, but at least then you'd have it confined to forty people. How about this? We announce CV is being evacuated. Everybody gets on the boats — everybody. Then we announce there's been a delay. And we wait until someone collapses. Then everybody from all the other boats goes back on board. What's wrong with that?"

Bliss rubbed his face wearily. "Mrs. Bernstein, it's the same as the other scheme. If we did as you suggest, presently we'd have one person taking care of thirty-nine victims — that's an inpossible situation on a lifeboat. And then if we did nothing, the remaining person would go into convulsions, presumably, and we'd be back where we started."

Bernstein was doodling on her pad. After a moment she said, "We're not thinking this through. The point is, do we want to isolate the parasite or not? If we do, there's got to be a way. Dr. McNulty, you said the thing can't go from one person to another more than four or five feet away, is that right?"

"About that, apparently," McNulty said.

"So we've got two problems here. The first one is, if people collapse on

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the lifeboat, we can't leave them there. They've got to be taken back to the hospital."

"And the first thing the parasite would do would be to jump to one of the people who come in to get the patient," said Bliss.

"All right. So put a *rope* on a gurney or whatever you call it. Open the lifeboat door, throw the rope in. People inside put the patient on the gurney, throw the rope out. We pull the patient out and close the door. The parasite is still inside."

"That might work," McNulty said. "But then you get to the point where there's one person left, and I just don't see any way out of that. Either you go in and get that person, or else—" His voice stopped.

"That's the second problem," Mrs. Bernstein said. "But the only reason it's a problem is we're looking at it the wrong way. Why is there only one person left? Because nobody else is coming in."

"I don't quite follow," said Bliss.

"Volunteers," said Mrs. Bernstein. "Get volunteers to go into the lifeboat one at a time, whenever we take a patient out. That way there's always somebody else for the parasite to jump to, and we can keep it there, in isolation, until we figure out something else to do."

After a moment Bliss said, "By George, I think she's got it."

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36

The final plan, everyone agreed, was eminently dislikable, but it was the best they could do. There had been a suggestion from Skolnik to evacuate just one deck, whichever one the parasite was known to be on; that had obvious attractions, but it quickly became clear that it was unworkable. For one thing, it would have meant new lifeboat assignments for people who happened to be on that deck at the time but were normally assigned elsewhere; for another, it would have meant closing elevators and stairways in order to keep people from wandering out of the area; and finally, it would have been an unusual procedure that would very likely alert the parasite that something was up.

In the end they went back to the original idea, with refinements. A boat drill would be announced. In order to guard against the possibility of confining staff members on the boat that carried the parasite, they would be reassigned to passenger lifeboats. After the passengers had boarded, there would be a thorough sweep to round up the stragglers; that would take the best part of three hours, during which time the parasite, if it was on one of the boats, would probably reveal itself. At that point the sweep could be abandoned; if not, it would go on to conclusion. At the end of the

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procedure, everyone in the passenger section, passengers and crew alike, would be in the lifeboats except for the duty officer and Bliss himself; a skeleton crew of kitchen staff, security people, and essential members of other departments; the hospitalized patients; and McNulty and the current shift of nurses.

The lottery was Skolnik's idea, improved on and elaborated by Jim Islip, the entertainment director. "It isn't enough to appeal to their civic duty," he said. "Don't misunderstand me, there are a lot of good people here, and they'll volunteer. But that's *grim,* and we don't want to be grim. Let's do it this way — we'll hold a drawing every afternoon in the forward Main Deck lobby, televised all over the vessel, with cash prizes for the winners. They'll get baskets of fruit and flowers delivered to their staterooms, and we'll post their names and photographs, and publish them in the *Journal,* and believe me, we'll get more people signing up that way than we would by telling them it's their duty."

"How much cash?" Eric Seaver wanted to know.

"For these people, it'll have to be substantial or it won't mean anything. I'd say two thousand dollars for the first name drawn, fifteen hundred for the second, a thousand for the third, then five hundred apiece for the rest."

"You're talking about seven thousand a *day,*" Seaver said.

"I know it, but this isn't a time to count pennies. The lottery has to work, and more than that, we've got to improve morale — make people see this as a kind of fun thing. If we don't, we're going to lose more than seven thousand a day just in vandalism."

Then there was a discussion about the recovered patients. "I see a problem here," McNulty said. "So far, nobody has ever been infected twice. Now, I don't know what that means. It could mean just that the parasite has so many people to choose from, there's no reason for it to take the same host a second time. But it could don't mean that it can't take a person twice, because of acquired immunity, or for some other reason that we don't know."

"What's the difference?" Bernstein asked.

"Well, it could happen that we'll wind up with recovered patients on the lifeboat, and they'll be stuck there. We can't take them off, because we still don't know if the parasite can reinfect them or not, and if they can't get off by getting infected, how do they get off?"

"What about just excusing them from the drill in the first place?"

"I'd be afraid to risk it. If we leave them on board, and it turns out that the parasite is in one of them, we'd have to start all over."

"We've got the same problem, only more so," said Schaffer, "with

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the rest of the people we leave on board. My kitchen people, security, et cetera, including all of us here."

"Let's take one problem at a time," Bliss said. "About the recovered patients, Doctor, I think I see a solution. After we find out which lifeboat the parasite is aboard, we clear out all the rest. The lifeboats are in pairs, two opening from each bay. We can seal off that bay satisfactorily, I think, and then transfer any recovered patients into the next boat. As soon as the next person collapses, we'll know where we are, and then we can let the recovered patients go. Mr. Young?"

"I can run you up a good sturdy barrier," said the carpentry chief. "Put a door in it, and a lock on the door. No problem there."

"Good. Any problem with security, then, Mr. Lundgren?"

"No, with a barrier there's no reason we can't handle it."

"All right, now about the rest of us, I think that's a bit simpler. Let's agree that we'll go on drill alert at 1500 in two days' time, but the drill won't be announced until you tell me, Doctor, that you've just had a fresh victim. If, by any bad luck, anyone on the reserve list happened to be in the same corridor or lobby as the victim, we'll make a last-minute substitution. Does that seem satisfactory to all of you? Good; then will you all please make up reserve lists, with standbys noted, and have them on my desk by 0900 tomorrow?"

Really, Bliss thought afterward, he had handled that rather well. It was just possible that he was going to get through this without disgracing himself.

37

When Norman Yeager got up the next afternoon, he found a flimsy in his tray about a new lifeboat assignment. He knew from the number that it was a passenger lifeboat; now why was that?

He sat down at his terminal, accessed the main computer, and looked over the lifeboat lists; then he called Bliss's secretary.

"Bunny, it's Norm Yeager. Why are you fooling around with the lifeboat assignments all of sudden, if you don't mind my asking?"

"There's going to be a special drill," said Bunny. "Something to do with the parasite. Keep it under your hat."

"Oh. All right." Idly he called up the lifeboat lists again and looked at the people he was going to be with: nobody special, and nobody he knew. Next he searched for Claiborne, Mr. and Mrs. Malcolm. They were in Lifeboat 31. Back to the lists, and he plucked out a name at random, M. Shanigar, and substituted his own. Then, to tidy up, he put M. Shanigar in the other lifeboat, the one where he was supposed to be. It would

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make a little confusion when Mr. S. got to Lifeboat 31, but never mind. At least he would get to see Mrs. Claiborne again, perhaps even to say a few words.

He really wanted no more than that, just the chance to sit down and have a talk with her, the good talk they had missed having in his room because she was so tired. He couldn't even claim that he knew her, and yet he felt that he really did: he knew the sweetness and gentleness in her, the deep enduring qualities her husband had never seen. He had watched the two of them together, after she got out of the hospital. Her husband was a gross physical presence, heavy and thick and stinking of tobacco: how could she stay with him? Sometimes Yeager imagined her saying, "Only you can save me." And he knew that he would; he would carry her off to a mountaintop, and they would live there highly and nobly, with his sword between them when they lay down at night.

And he knew at the same time that these were only imaginings, that she was a married woman with responsibilities somewhere, maybe even children; a house, friends he had never met, an occupation, the thousand details of a life. And even knowing all this, he longed for just the chance to speak to her, to hear her say, "You can help me." Because it was possible that she really wanted to get away from that man — how could she not? — and even if she only said, "Hide me," or "Please lend me some money," or anything, it would be a joy to him, yes, even if he knew he would never see her again.

The boat drill took place at 3:30. A few people were drunk in their staterooms, or elsewhere, and did not attend. There were other problems, too: the manager of the Promenade Theater had not received word, or had forgotten, and had failed to turn off his screen. Thirty people had to be rounded up from the theater, but by that time it didn't matter: the parasite had been found.

From his seat in the middle of Lifeboat 31, the fat man watched with interest as the steward called the roll. He remembered being in a lifeboat before, but he had not been paying much attention then. The lifeboat, evidently, was a small vessel that could be released from the bigger one in an emergency. Was there any possibility that an emergency would occur while he was aboard it?

"Mr. Eller?"

"Here," he answered.

The passengers opposite him were mostly prosperous-looking middleaged Americans. There was one younger couple, holding hands, and farther down in the row there was a still younger man, unusually dressed.

The steward was explaining the

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features of the lifeboat, and what would happen in the event of an emergency. The fat man was not looking in that direction, and could not see the control panel; hoping for a better view, he slipped out, across the fuzzy space, and in again so deftly now that she felt almost no disorientation as the fat man's weight slumped against her and then rolled to the floor.

People were standing up to look. The steward, aided by a man with a white armband, rolled the fat man over and loosened his collar. Then the steward returned to the front of the boat. "Please take your seats, ladies and gentlemen!" he called.

The lifeboat door opened, and a rope flew through the opening. The steward picked it up, pulled on it; a bed on wheels came rolling in. "May I have some assistance?" the steward asked. Two men came forward; with the steward and the security guard, they lifted the man's body and got it onto the bed. They wheeled the bed up to the front. The steward spoke on the phone again; the door opened, the steward threw out the rope. Presently the wheeled bed, with the fat man on it, rolled through the doorway and disappeared.

The steward turned. "Ladies and gentlemen, I can now inform you that this boat drill has been held for a special purpose. The purpose is to isolate the carrier of the epidemic, in order to allow the other passengers to resume their normal activities. As you know, the disease is quite harmless—"

"Wait a minute," called a white-haired woman. "Are you saying that we're all quarantined on this boat?"

"That is unfortunately the case. However, this merely means that each of us, including myself, will be here until they become ill, and then we will spend ten days in the hospital receiving the best of care."

There were other voices, but she hardly heard them. It was clear now that she had made an unforgivable mistake: she had underestimated her opponents.

Was it possible that they were now prepared to let one of their number die in order to be rid of her? If so, her destiny had turned, all in that single unsuspecting moment when she had walked into the lifeboat; the game was lost, her death certain, her children unborn.

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The steward spoke on the phone again, then turned and faced the passengers.

"Mrs. Claiborne?"

"Here," said the young woman opposite.

The steward came and bent over her. "May I see your ID, please?" He

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took the cards she handed him, examined them carefully. "Will you please come with me?"

"I'm sorry, what is this for?"

"You are being released, because you have already had the disease. You will be taken to quarantine in another lifeboat, and then when we are sure that the disease carrier is still here, you will be free to go."

She looked at her husband. "Malcolm, I don't want to leave you here alone."

"No, you must go," he said, pressing her hand. "There's no point in both of us being cooped up; don't turn martyr on me again, will you?"

She smiled. "All right, I'll try not to. See you soon."

The steward led her to the front of the boat. The door opened, and a gray-haired man walked in. At the steward's nod, Mrs. Claiborne walked out. The door closed.

"Steward, may I ask what is happening?" an old woman demanded.

"Yes, madam. Mrs. Claiborne has been replaced because she had already had the disease. This gentleman is a volunteer, to replace the lady who became ill. Each of us who becomes ill will be replaced in this way, and so you see, we will all be able to leave the lifeboat very shortly."

Now their strategy was clear, and she admired it for the ingenious way it circumvented their taboo against killing. It was evident, moreover, from the lengths they had gone to, that they were not willing to sacrifice one of their number. Therefore her response must be to show that their strategy could not succeed. When they realized that, they would have to release her along with the rest of the passengers. But what if they did not?

The steward was passing, and she slipped out and across and in, so smoothly that he did not notice until he heard the woman's body fall to the floor. He knelt and straightened her out, pulled down her skirt. Her pulse was steady and slow. It was interesting, the steward thought, how stupid and ugly people invariably looked when they were unconscious.

Yeager had to get out, and he thought he knew a way to do it. If he fell over, seemed to collapse, and if he didn't move, not for anything, they would take him out on a litter. Then he could "recover" when he got to the infirmary, and once he was out, there would be no reason to put him back in again. And he would find her sitting in a restaurant, or in a deck chair by the pool, and he would say, smiling, "May I join you?"

He closed his eyes, let his body go limp. He was careful to twist a little as he went down, so that he struck the floor with his shoulder and rolled over onto his back. He lay there, schooling himself to breathe slowly, and listened to the voices around him.

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The steward hurried back down the aisle. His curiosity was aroused: there was something odd about the appearance of the young man on the floor — he did not look ill, or even unconscious; he looked like someone pretending to be asleep. In the act of kneeling, he slipped out once more and in again, and when he heard the body fall beside him, he was so startled that he almost opened his eyes.

After a long time he felt himself lifted and placed on a litter. He was being rolled up the aisle; then there was a wait. The door opened. "Two of them this time," said a voice a little distance away.

"Yes."

"Well, it's going faster, anyhow."

The litter moved again, swung around, halted. He heard another door opening. He concentrated on being limp, not giving in to the temptation to look through his eyelashes. Now they were going into an elevator; the door closed, the elevator was moving. Now he was being wheeled down a long hall. Another door. "Two this time!" said a female voice. "Oh, Dr. McNulty!"

Another presence was bending over him. "Get the tube into that one, will you, Terri?" said the voice. "Something funny about this one—"

And he slipped out through the fuzzy space and in again, and as he bent over the patient, he could see that he had been mistaken; the young man was in a typical stupor, eyes half-closed, breathing almost imperceptibly. He must be cracking up, thought Dr. McNulty.

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Nothing more happened on the lifeboat for the rest of the day. At the staff meeting in the morning, McNulty said, "There's no use speculating, but what bothers me is that the thing may be deliberately holding back. Staying in one host until the victim dies."

"Can it do that?" asked Higpen.

"It did once before."

"I don't see what it would gain," said Arline Truman. There were faint brown semicircles under her eyes.

"Well, if it killed another person, we'd have to take the rest of them out of there."

"But what if we didn't? Then it would be stuck on the lifeboat."

"We'd have to," said McNulty. His face was grim.

"All right, but it doesn't know that. Maybe it's trying to bluff us."

"As you say, Doctor, there's not much use in speculating," said Bliss. "It may be a war of nerves. When it sees that we don't flinch, it will change hosts again, and then we'll go on with the volunteers as we planned."

"Yes, and then what?" Bernstein wanted to know. "Mr. Bliss, I didn't get much sleep last night. I was thinking, what if this plan works — what then?"

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"It gives us a breathing space."

"That's not good enough."

"I know it isn't. Doctor, have you had any luck with the drug idea?"

"No."

"What drug idea is that?" Bernstein demanded.

"Oh, just a thought. We wondered if there might be some common drug that would keep the parasite from invading anyone."

"The sample is too small," McNulty said. "So far I haven't found anybody who was under the influence of marijuana or barbiturates, or half a dozen other things, when they were taken over by the parasite, but that doesn't prove anything."

"What about dosing the volunteers before they go in?" Truman asked.

"Worth trying, maybe. There are thousands of drugs."

Bernstein said, "I want you to look at this. What if the drugs don't work, what if nothing works? Then there's only one way we're going to kill that parasite, and that's to kill the person it's in."

McNulty was shaking his head.

"Throw him overboard," said Bernstein. "Right down to the bottom of the sea."

"We can't do that," said McNulty almost inaudibly.

"Maybe we can't do anything else," said Bernstein. "We're going to have to face this sooner or later, and it might as well be now."

"Mrs. Bernstein, let's not exaggerate. Doctor, I had another thought — what about the period when the parasite is between hosts? Something like a crab out of its shell. Do you suppose it might be vulnerable then?"

McNulty stroked his chin. "Vulnerable to what?" he said. "Electrical fields, maybe?"

"Yes, something like that. Mr. Jacobs, could you rig up some sort of gadget?"

"Sure, if I know what you want."

"Well, more or less a little of everything. Electrical fields, ultrasound, radio frequencies, anything you can think of."

"It will look like some kind of Buck Rogers gun," said Jacobs, grinning.

"All right, but if it turns the trick, we don't mind. Is there anything else? Any other suggestions? Until tomorrow, then."

The observer was delighted with this unique opportunity to observe McNulty, the man who was charged with caring for his former hosts, and he was interested by the dim, distorted image of himself as McNulty imagined him. He admired the doctor for his humility, his lack of self-deception, and his deep anguish at having caused the death of a patient; these qualities gave his personality a flavor that the observing mind found deeply satisfying.

Through McNulty, also, he had gained insight into the characters of

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the other rulers of Sea Venture, particularly Bliss and Bernstein. Bliss was a conscientious and unimaginative man, an administrator. Bernstein, by far the strongest personality in the ruling circle, had nearly been the death of him. He had considered taking them both if he could, but he had concluded that it would be foolish to put them out of action, since they would be replaced by others about whom he knew nothing. Furthermore, the engineer Jacobs represented a possible threat that must be investigated.

As they got up to leave, he saw his opportunity and slipped out, across to the man waiting his turn at the doorway and in again, and the startlement and confusion crashed in around him as the body fell to the floor and someone else tripped over it.

"My God, it's Dr. McNulty!" said Bliss's voice. "Mr. Skolnik, too?"

"No, I'm all right," said Skolnik, getting to his feet. "But I think he's got it."

"How is that possible?" said somebody.

"Mr. Seaver, call the hospital, please, get a litter up here."

"Do you want me, Chief?" said Jacobs.

"No, that's all right." Jacobs and one or two others walked out.

"Do you realize," Arline Truman was saying, "that this means the parasite was in Dr. McNulty all the time we were talking? It knows every single thing we said."

A horrid thought came into Bliss's mind. He said loudly, "Ladies and gentlemen, will you please all move away from one another? Get out of the doorway, if you will, back into the room ... that's right, thank you. I'd like you to keep at least five feet away from each other. When you leave, please do so one at a time, keeping your distance." He looked around. "Who's missing? Taggart, Williams, and Jacobs. Mr. Seaver, will you please try to get them on the phone and tell them the same thing? Tell them to stay at least five feet away from everyone."

"What's this for?" Skolnik asked.

"The parasite is probably in one of us at this moment. We have reason to think that it can't travel more than four feet or so from one person to another. If the thing went from one to another of us, it could put the whole operating staff in the hospital."

Higpen said quietly to Yetta Bernstein, "We can't go back to perm."

"You're right."

"What about elevators?" Eric Seaver asked. "And restaurants? You can't even get from one place to another in Sea Venture without coming closer than five feet to somebody."

"In that case, don't go out. We'll do our conferences by phone if necessary. Do your work the same way as much as you possibly can. Have your meals in your rooms, and be sure the stewards don't come near you."

Higpen attracted Truman's atten-

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tion. "Arline, Yetta and I think we'd better stay somewhere until this is cleared up. Can you get us a couple of rooms?"

"Yes." She put her hand to her forehead. "Let me think. I'm not even sure I can get back to my office. All right. I'll call them from here, get the numbers of the rooms, and I'll have somebody open them and leave the keys inside."

"Thank you."

"All right, then," said Bliss, "if there are no more questions, will you please leave one at a time? As soon as we know where we are, I'll notify all of you."

Jacobs went into his office, feeling shaken up. The thing had never attacked a staff member before, and he had unconsciously assumed it wouldn't. He sat down, put his feet up on his desk, and began to think about Bliss's idea for a Buck Rogers gun. Electrical fields, radio hash, no problem, just an unshielded motor — a drill would do, and he could use the grip and trigger for the rest of the stuff. Diagrams went through his head. Ultrasonics, maybe not — they had an ultrasound generator in the fishery, but it was too big. Ultraviolet, though....

And as the observer absorbed his knowledge, he saw that none of the things Jacobs was planning could harm him. He had thought as much, but it was important to be sure. When the steward came in with the lunch cart, he slipped out again and watched as Jacobs toppled silently to the floor.

40

After Jacobs, no more of the staff were attacked. Bliss kept up the five-foot rule just the same; it was a nuisance, almost unenforceable, but he could not see what else to do. Patients were still coming into the hospital annex, five or six a day. About half of them were stewards, and the problem there was serious. Some of the remaining stewards were flatly refusing to work, and Skolnik had been forced to offer them stupendous bonuses.

The horrifying thing was that the parasite had got off the lifeboat in spite of all their precautions, If it could do that, then perhaps everything they thought they knew about it was false. Bliss realized for the first time how much they had all depended on McNulty. Now there was nobody to take the strain but Bliss himself, and he alone knew how inadequate he was.

He saw very clearly that his failure might mean the collapse of civilization. It was all very well to say that bad behavior was due to irrational instincts, but if it weren't for instincts, nobody would do anything at all. Nations would break down, the family would break down— Who would get married and have children, for instance, if they were guided only by reason?

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So he had to find the way to eliminate the parasite. He knew there must be a way, but although he squeezed his brain like a damp sponge, for the life of him he couldn't see what it was.

After Emily got out of the hospital, the world began to seem very strange. Things around her were less frightening and at the same time, in some indefinable way, less interesting. The lifeboats, for example, were merely lifeboats and not wells of terror. She saw now why Jim had been so impatient with her; he could not understand why she was so frightened of so many things, and now she could not understand it herself. She was not frightened of Jim, either, and that was a hard thing for both of them to get used to. He looked at her in bafflement sometimes, as if she were a stranger. They were extraordinarily polite to each other. She saw that in a way he missed the old Emily, because that Emily had needed him.

No matter where they went, she never heard the sound of the grocery cart now, and she knew it was gone forever. It was as if a kind of vacuum cleaner had taken the fuzz out of her brain. And she was grateful for that, but she saw now that her fears and delusions had been all she had. Sometimes, lying awake at night, she tried to summon one of them up again like a familiar old ache. But they were gone, and she didn't know who she was.

• • •

Phil and Rodney Thurston were twins: eighteen years old, red-haired, and green-eyed. Phil was the taller one; Rodney was a little heavier and rounder-faced. They were traveling with their father; their mother was dead. The trip, their father said, was a reward for their having graduated from the Stowe School without disgrace and having successfully crammed for Harvard. Phil and Rodney would have preferred a month in Paris, or even Denver. Half the time they walked around with SeeMan headgear on, watching the frantic images on the screen and listening to the earphones. They went to plays and concerts with their father when they had to — the old man was a bear on culture — and commented politely, because if they didn't, he would go into his berserk mode. To each other, in moments of privacy, they said, "Bor-ring."

When their father collapsed in the Sports Deck Lounge and was carried away to the hospital, things began to look up. The new atmosphere of Sea Venture was exciting, and it was wonderful to be absolutely free. At first they only stayed up all night and got drunk on whiskey. Later they tried other things.

A branch whipped at his eyes as he stood up, and he jerked away with a feeling of anger and resentment, as if it were somebody's fault that he

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hadn't seen the branch, or had misjudged the distance. It was the kind of feeling that made you go down to City Hall and complain. What was he sore about, that his eyes wouldn't focus that close? And where was that, anyway, in the woods behind his parents' house, or when had it happened? It was gone, just that little bit complete in itself but with nothing before or after.

"Put it down over there," her voice said. "It" was a stoneware jug, sweating cold, and "there" was an enamel-topped table in the potting shed. That was all, a crisp little bit of memory or desire — it could have happened, they had spent a lot of time in that potting shed, but he did not recognize it, had never thought it important enough to save, and he had no idea what came on either side of it. He spoke her name, trying to bring her back, to turn around so he could see her, and at the same time he knew that was all there was: just the coolness of the white jug in his hands, and the voice, unemphatic, not laden with any message — just "Put it down over there."

He remembered how he had thought he was prepared for Nita's death, and more than prepared —impatient for it, as an end to her pain and his. When she died, he was unready for the depth of his grief. Grief wasn't even the word; he did not perceive himself as grieving, or mourning; it was more as if he were trying to come to terms with some inarguable fact that made everything else meaningless.

It was only his work that had pulled him through it, and for months, even after he thought he was over it and was fooling everybody, there would be absolutely unexpected tidal waves of sorrow.

And he had been a better physician for it, after a while, and it had even occurred to him that every doctor who had to deal with people's pain ought to have to undergo something like this himself, maybe as part of the internship. You couldn't kill off the intern's wife — and if he was as poor as most of them, he didn't have one anyway — but you could give him something he greatly desired and let him get used to it and then take it away. That would do something, maybe, for the habit of reducing patients to parts of the body — "this liver," or "this melanoma," the way so many doctors did.

He dimly knew that he was a patient himself right now, must be, this sense of floating around not quite bodiless but almost, and it had the comforting feel of being too sick to go to school when he was a kid, bundled up safe and warm in bed in the little room behind the kitchen, with his mother somewhere out there ready to bring him asprins and tea. It was that kind of feeling of not having any problems or responsibilities, just having to be sick, which was easy and

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pleasant to do. And drift from one place to another.

Here now was one of those places in Disneyland or wherever it was, with green stick people climbing around in their network spikes the color of mole fur. Their faces weren't human, but that didn't bother him the way it had before; it was just interesting, and he knew it would be easier to understand them later on — "when we are all brothers and sisters."

41

Hartman was more deeply disturbed than ever by what was happening in Sea Venture. He had seen violence before, during the London riots in the eighties, and after the Lisbon earthquake. When civil order broke down, people who were normally restrained took advantage of the opportunity to loot and break things; that was understandable. But wasn't this something different?

Boys walking up to an elderly woman, taking her cane away and using it to break her bones. Assaults with broken Coke bottles; rapes, knifings. It was senseless, purposeless violence, as if, Hartman thought, there were some dark half-aware force in human beings that saw itself threatened, and was striking out like a wounded animal.

When the call for security volunteers went out, Hartman offered his services and was given a supervisory post on the night shift. A little before midnight of his third day, he was sitting at his desk in the corridor when he saw Hal Winter coming toward him.

"Well, we meet again," said Hartman. He looked at the white armband on Winter's sleeve and the nightstick in his hand.

"You, too?"

"Oh, yes. They think I'm too feeble to patrol, but they let me supervise. They've even given me a title, the same one I had before; that's very nice in a way. Well, let me tell you the drill. Your section is the port side of this deck, midships forward, from Corridor A to E. Your partner should be here in a few minutes, and he'll show you the ropes. Here's my number; you call that if there's any trouble. Do that *first*. Every hour you're allowed a ten-minute rest period here — you see I've got coffee, doughnuts, all the comforts of home. They've told you, I expect, about excessive force?"

"Yes."

"Well, don't take it too seriously. If there is any trouble, talk your way out of it if you can, but if you can't, use the baton — that's what it's for. Had any training with the stick?"

"No."

"Let me show you one or two things. If it's a man with a weapon, go for the wrist, shoulder, elbow — anything to make him drop it. Or if he's too active for that, thrust straight for

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the gut. The baton gives you sixteen inches' reach, probably more than anything he'll be carrying. If you hit him hard enough, you'll paralyze his solar plexus, and he'll be in enough pain that you shouldn't have any trouble getting him to come along peacefully. The detention rooms are right here, down the corridor. Now, say it's a man attacking a woman. In that case I wouldn't advise the talk method. Tap him behind the ear, like this, or on the temple, about hard enough to crush a grapefruit. Don't be too dainty. The idea is to stun him, or knock him out, but if you happen to give him a concussion, don't worry — better him than you. Is that all clear?"

"Yes. I hope so." Winter smiled.

"You're a big, strong lad; you shouldn't have any problems. Good luck to you."

The first time was when they were coming back from a late movie, cutting across the residential corridors to get to the elevators on the starboard side. Ahead of them was an old woman hobbling along with a cane. "Ten points," said Rodney.

They looked at each other. Phil said, "Dare you."

Rodney said nothing, but there was a glint in his eye. He started to walk faster. Phil hurried to keep up, suddenly excited, wondering if he would really do it.

They came up behind the old woman. As they were about to pass, Rodney reached out, grabbed the cane, and pulled. "Oh!" said the old woman as she fell. Her eyes were like oysters; she was still holding onto the cane. Rodney yanked it away from her. His face was flushed, his lips bright. He raised the cane and brought it down across her knees. Then they ran, with her screams behind them.

They hid the cane behind a grandfather clock in the lounge. The next night they got another one, and then every night when they went prowling, they both had their canes.

For a while they specialized in old people, but that got boring, and one night they caught a young woman alone. They backed her into a doorway, and Rodney held his cane across her throat while Phil pulled her panties down. Afterward they didn't look at each other or speak; but three nights later they did it again.

Although the corridors of Sea Venture were strewn with paper and trash, ceiling lights broken, some TV screens blank, a curious semblance of normal life went on; the casino was closed, but the restaurants and bars were open; the only difference, aside from the litter, was that you met fewer people, and some of them were a little strange. Barlow and Geller, picking their times and places with some care, had never had any trouble; Geller looked just sufficiently large and bad-tempered to discourage

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interference, and Barlow carried a dissecting knife in her purse.

They were sitting in the Quarterdeck Bar one afternoon, drinking margaritas. "There's one," said Barlow, looking across the room. "No, both of them are."

Geller followed the direction of her gaze. "Yeah."

"They're looking at us."

"Well, why not?" Geller raised his glass and smiled.

The man was saying something to the woman. After a moment they rose and came across the lounge, carrying their drinks. "May we introduce ourselves?" said the man. "My name is John Stevens. Allow me to present Julie Prescott."

"Sit down," Geller said. "Randy Geller, Yvonne Barlow." They slid over to make room.

"You are both recovered patients of the epidemic, isn't that so?" asked Stevens.

"No. 1 and No. 2. The question is, How did you know?"

"I think it's something about your faces," Julie Prescott said. "But I really don't know how I know — I just do."

"Which of you was No. 1?" Stevens asked politely.

"I was," Geller replied. "Down in the marine lab. McNulty thinks it was something that came out of an australite we dredged up. He also thinks it isn't a disease, it's an intelligent parasite."

"And you don't believe this?"

"Oh, yeah, I believe it, too."

"Do you work in the marine laboratory also, Ms. Barlow?"

"Yvonne. I did — we both did — but we quit."

"I see. Because it didn't make sense anymore?"

"That's right."

They looked at each other. Barlow had a curious sense that the words themselves were unimportant.

"Do you think that is the recognition factor, then? We recognize those to whom life no longer makes sense?"

"Not life," said Barlow. "The way we used to live."

"And how will you live now?"

Geller said, "Yvonne and I are going to set up a little private lab on the Upper Peninsula in Michigan. We can do enough commercial work to get by, and still do some real science."

"That will not be marine science, will it, in Michigan?"

"No, but biology is biology. Yvonne is interested in schistosome dermatitis. Swimmer's itch. It's a parasite, maybe that's why she likes it. What about you?"

"I'm not sure yet. I think my problem is with life in general."

Julie said, "I'm going to paint, I think. For a year or two, anyhow, long enough to find out if I'm any good."

"Always assuming we get off Sea Venture," said Geller.

Stevens smiled. "Oh, we'll get off.

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One way or another."

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The makeup was Rodney's idea. With pale powder on their faces, and old-man wigs stolen from the costume shop behind the theater, wearing their father's suits, they could hobble along like two old crippos, and nobody would think twice about their canes.

One night they had a bit of bad luck. They had just tripped an old woman, and Rodney had given her a whack on the head to keep her quiet, when someone appeared around the corner and came toward them. There were two of them, men with nightsticks in their hands and white brassards on their sleeves.

Phil and Rodney looked at each other. "Sweet, play it sweet," Rodney muttered.

"What happened here?" said one of the men. "Who did this?" He bent down on one knee to look at the unconscious woman.

"Officers, it was horrible," said Rodney in his old-man voice. "These two boys came up, and, and just *hit* her with a stick."

"Which way did they go?" said the other man, moving closer. He was looking at them in a way Phil did not like.

"Down the corridor," said Rodney, pointing. He bent over, clutching his chest. "Oh, I don't feel well at all. It's my heart."

"May I see some ID?" asked the second man. The first one was standing up, talking into his phone. The second one was coming too close.

"Geronimo!" yelled Rodney, and swung his stick at the man with the phone. Phil brought his cane up hard between the other one's legs. The man hit him on the cheek with his nightstick, but Phil was dodging, and he hooked the man's leg and brought him down. Then Rodney was hitting him, too, and the man was sprawling beside the other with blood coming out of his mouth. Then the boys ran. It wasn't till later that Phil began to feel the pain of his broken cheekbone.

Early in the morning, Stevens was awakened by the buzz of the phone.

"John. I'm sorry to trouble you, but Hal hasn't come back, and I can't seem to raise him on the telephone. They don't seem to know anything about it at security. I wonder if—"

"Of course. I'll find out what I can and call you in a few minutes."

Stevens put the phone down, then thumbed it on again, punched the hospital. After a moment a tired female voice answered.

"Can you tell if you've admitted a patient named Harold Winter in the past few hours?"

"Let me check." Stevens waited. "Yes, he was admitted at 4 A.M."

"May I ask his condition?"

"He's stable. It's a concussion.

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We'll know more in five or six hours."

"Thank you."

Stevens got up and began to dress. His actions were automatic; he was in no doubt of what he was going to do. He put a sap in one pocket, the flat leather case in another.

Ever since his recovery he had been in a half-pleasurable state of suspension. He had told Newland that he didn't believe in accidents, but that was not true. Now that he no longer valued his past, he felt that his future was exquisitely, weightlessly in balance, that any puff of air might topple him one way or another. He had been waiting with curiosity to see if fate would send him a message. Now here it was.

He knocked on Newland's door. "Paul, it's John."

"Just a moment."

Newland opened the door. He was in his wheelchair, still dressed in pajamas. "What is it, is he hurt?"

"Yes. I'm afraid so. They want me to bring you down — he's conscious, but they can't move him."

"Oh, God," said Newland. His voice broke. "How did it happen?"

"They're not sure. Somebody attacked him, down on the Boat Deck." He closed the door behind Newland and walked beside his chair to the elevator.

"The *Boat* Deck?" said Newland.

"Yes, they changed his section this morning." The elevator took them down; the door sighed open.

Stevens led him to the lifeboat bay. It was dark there; one of the ceiling lights had been broken.

"Here?" Newland asked, peering in, just before Stevens hit him with the sap. The old man slumped over; there was no blood.

Stevens wheeled him into the alcove. He took the flat plastic strip out of its case, slid it into the lock. The door opened; he pushed the chair through, closed the door behind him, then opened the second door, the one to the boat itself. The lights and air conditioning came on as they entered.

Stevens left the chair in the aisle and went forward to the pilot's console while he pulled on his gloves. Through the thick portholes he could see wind-driven spray dashing against the hull. In his mind's eye he saw the boat slide out of its tube, plunge into the water, bob up, then slowly drift astern. Not bad: a Viking's funeral.

Newland was breathing slowly and shallowly. He was not dead yet, but soon.

Stevens returned to the access panel beside the door, removed it, and examined the controls. He flipped the switch marked SIGNAL OFF. He set the timer for two minutes and turned the AUTO LAUNCH control to the ON position. He left the access panel on the floor. With a last glance at Newland's gray head, he went out the way he had come.

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For two minutes nothing happened in the lifeboat. Then the timer clicked. The umbilicals were uncoupled and withdrawn. The hydraulic ram on the far side of the boat slid back, releasing the boat; compressed air blew it out of the tube. The engine fired automatically, propelling the boat to windward, away from Sea Venture.

(to be concluded next month)

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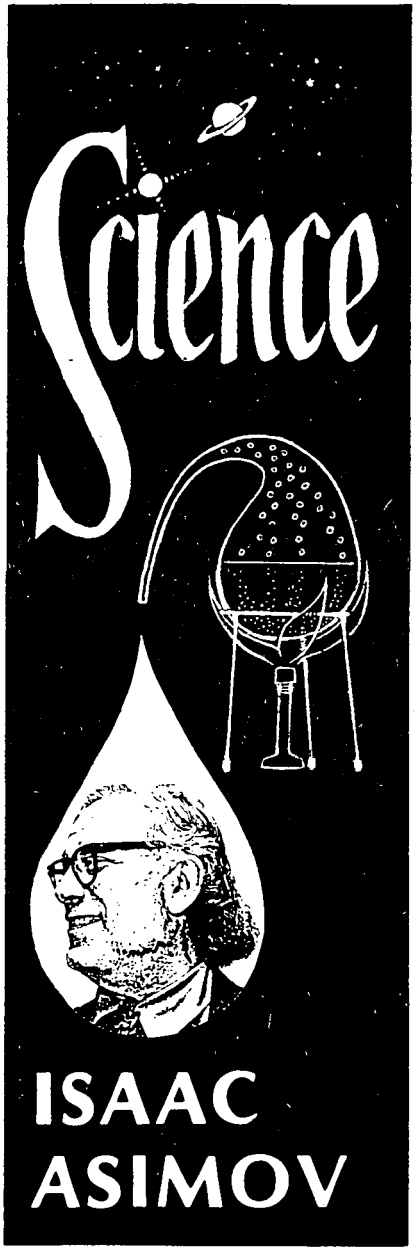

SALT AND BATTERY

At a recent meeting of the Trap Door Spiders (the small and infinitely interesting little group on which I base my Black Widower mysteries), my good friend L. Sprague de Camp told the following historical anecdote, which must be true, for I never heard it before.

"Goethe," he said, "came to Vienna once to visit Beethoven, and they went out together for a walk. The Viennese, recognizing the two, were awe-struck. Everyone the two great men encountered hastened to step aside and make room for them, the men bowing low and the women curtsying deeply.

"Finally, Goethe said, 'You know, Herr van Beethoven, I find these expressions of adulation quite wearying.'

"To which Beethoven replied, 'Please do not let it disturb you, Herr von Goethe, I am quite certain these expressions of adulation are meant for me.' "

The tale was greeted with general laughter, and no one laughed more heartily than I, since I am particularly fond of statements that represent artless self-appreciation (for what my readers may call "obvious reasons").

Once I had done laughing, however, I said, "You know, I think Beethoven was right. He was the greater man."

"Really?" said Sprague. "Why so, Isaac?"

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"Well," I said, "one has to translate Goethe."

There was a short silence and then Jean Le Corbeiller (who teaches mathematics and is a prince of good fellows) said, "You know, Isaac, you probably don't realize it, but you have said something very profound."

Actually, of course, I did realize it, but one *must* be modest, so I said, "It's terrible, Jean. I say profound things all the time and I always fail to realize it."

You can't be more modest than that, I think.

In any case, it is quite possible that in these, my monthly essays, I may occasionally, quite by accident, say something profound. If you catch me at it, do let me know. I would appreciate it.

What I would like to talk about this month started with an Italian anatomist, Luigi Galvani, (1737-1798). He was interested in muscle action and in electric experimentation as well. He kept a Leyden jar in his laboratory — a device that can store substantial quantities of electrical charge. When a charged Leyden jar is discharged into a person, it can give him a very nasty electric shock. Even a relatively mild discharge would cause his muscles to contract and cause him to jerk in an amusing way (to other people, that is).

In 1791, Galvani observed that sparks from a discharging Leyden jar, would, on contact with the thigh muscles of freshly dissected frogs, cause those muscles, though dead, to contract violently, as if they were alive.

That had been observed before, but Galvani went on to notice something entirely new. When a metal scalpel touched the dead thigh muscles at a time when a spark was drawn from a nearby Leyden jar, the muscle twitched even though the spark made no direct contact.

This was action at a distance. Galvani supposed the electric spark might have induced an electric charge in the metal scalpel, and that charge, in turn, might have affected the muscle.

If this were so, then perhaps one could get the same sort of action at a distance from lightning, which was, by then, known to be a discharge spark just like that of the Leyden jar, but on a vastly more enormous scale (see THE FATEFUL LIGHTNING, F&SF, June 1969). If the Leyden jar could make itself felt across a few feet, the lightning should be able to do it from a distance of a few miles.

Galvani waited for a thunderstorm, therefore, and then took his frog's

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thigh muscles and suspended them by brass hooks from an iron railing outside his window. Sure enough when the lightning flashed, the thigh muscles twitched. There was only one catch — when the lightning did *not* flash, the muscles twitched also.

The puzzled Galvani experimented some more and found that the twitching took place when the muscles, in contact with the brass, also made contact with the iron railings. Two dissimilar metals, in simultaneous contact with the muscle, could not only produce muscle contractions, but they could do so a number of times. It seemed obvious that an electric charge had to be involved somehow, and that this charge was not permanently discharged by the contraction, but could be regenerated over and over again.

The question was: what was the source of the electricity?

To Galvani, the anatomist, it seemed that it had to be the muscle. Muscle is a very complicated substance, while iron and brass are just iron and brass. He therefore spoke of "animal electricity."

Galvani's experiments were widely publicized and the public found them exciting. After all, muscle-twitching seemed to be characteristic of life. Dead muscle didn't twitch when left to itself. If it twitched under an electric discharge, it might be that electricity possessed a kind of life force that made dead muscle momentarily act as though it were alive.

This was startling, and it got some people to thinking that there might be ways to restore life to dead tissue by the way of electricity. It was a great new "science fiction" notion and helped give rise to ***Frankenstein,*** which some people consider the first important piece of true science fiction.

To this day, a person reacting with muscle contractions to an electric shock (or to any unexpected sensation or emotion) is said to be "galvanized."

Not everyone accepted Galvani's notion of animal electricity. His chief opponent was another Italian scientist, Alessandro Volta (1745-1827). Volta thought it might be the metals that were the source of electricity and not the muscle. To test the matter, he tested two dissimilar metals in contact and, by 1794, found that these produced an electric charge even when no muscle was anywhere near.

(This embittered poor Galvani's last years. His beloved wife died, and, in 1797, he lost his professional position when he refused to swear allegiance to the new government set up by the invading General

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Napoleon Bonaparte. He died soon afterward in poverty and misery. Volta, on the other hand, was indifferent to governments and readily swore allegiance to anyone in power so that he prospered through Napoleon's rise to supreme power, and then prospered equally through Napoleon's fall and afterward.)

To Volta, the *fact* of an electrical charge at the juncture of two dissimilar metals was clear, though the *explanation* was not. (This is a common enough situation in science. Thus, today, the fact of biological evolution is not in dispute among sane scientists and even the general explanation is clear, but some of the details of the explanation still remain in dispute.)

Sometimes, it takes a long time for a satisfactory explanation to be reached. In the case of two-metal electricity, the proper explanation didn't arrive till a century had elapsed after the fact was first observed.

Nowadays, we know that all substances are composed of atoms, each of which, in turn, consists of a tiny positively-charged nucleus at the center, and a number of negatively-charged electrons at the outskirts. The positive charge on the nucleus just balances the total negative charge on the electrons, so the atom, left to itself, is electrically-uncharged, or neutral.

In the case of each different kind of atom, electrons can be removed, but with different degrees of difficulty. Thus, electrons can be removed from zinc atoms with greater ease than they can be from copper atoms. To put it another way, copper atoms hold their electrons more firmly than zinc atoms do.

Well, then, imagine a piece of copper and a piece of zinc making firm contact with each other. The electrons in the zinc atoms at the metal boundary would have a tendency to slip across into the copper. Copper, with its stronger grip, wrests the electrons from zinc.

The copper, gaining negatively-charged electrons, naturally gains a negative charge overall. The zinc, losing electrons, has some of the positive charge on its atomic nuclei unbalanced and therefore develops a positive charge. It is this difference in charge that can be detected by experimenters and that lends the metal combination its electrical behavior.

It might seem that the electric charge at the metal junction can be built up indefinitely as more and more electrons move from the zinc to the copper, but that is not so. As the copper develops a negative electric charge, it begins to repel the negatively-charged electrons (like charges

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repel), and this makes it harder for more electrons to enter. On the other hand, as the zinc develops a positive electric charge, this attracts those electrons that remain in the zinc (unlike charges attract), and this makes it harder for more electrons to leave.

The greater the charge the two metals develop, the more difficult it is for a still greater charge to come into being. Very quickly, the process is brought to a complete halt at a time when only a tiny (but detectable) charge has developed.

Even this small effect has its uses. As the temperature is changed, the force attracting electrons to the nuclei of atoms is also changed, but generally by different amounts for different metals. This means that as temperature changes, the tendency for electrons to move from one metal to another across a junction, and, therefore the size of the developing electric charge, will increase or decrease. Such "thermoelectric junctions" can therefore be used as thermometers.

What was in Volta's mind, however, was the development of a device from which an electric charge could be drawn off, and within which the charge could then regenerate. Since the dissimilar metals could induce a muscle twitch over and over, they should build up their electric charge over and over. If the charge is drawn off no more rapidly than it can be built up, one could have a steady flow of electricity.

This would be a great novelty, for, until then, for over two thousand years, scientists had studied only "static electricity," an electric charge which is built up in a particular place and stays there and which flows, momentarily, through discharge. Volta was planning to produce "dynamic electricity," an electric charge which moves steadily through a conductor for an indefinite period. Such a phenomenon is usually called an "electric current," because in very many ways it is similar in its properties to a water current.

In order to make electricity flow, Volta needed to have something it would flow through. It was already known that electricity could be conducted by solutions of certain inorganic substances, and, in 1800, Volta used the most common of all such substances — table salt, or sodium chloride.

It was his intention to begin with a bowl that was half full of salt water, and dip a strip of copper into one side of it and a strip of zinc into the other. Volta realized, however, that the effect would be multiplied if he made use of many such cups. For the purpose, he devised a number

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of metal strips, one end of each being zinc, the other end being copper.

Settling up a line of bowls of salt water, Volta bent each metal strip into a U-shape, dipping the zinc end into one bowl and the copper end into the next bowl. When he was done, each bowl had a zinc end in the salt water on one side, and a copper end on the other.

The total electric charge increased with the number of bowls. Volta could lead this charge from the zinc strip at one end of the series of bowls, to the copper strip at the other end, and then through the salt water of the bowls to the zinc strip from which it started. Volta thus had his electric current (which was, of course, essentially a stream of electrons, but Volta couldn't know that).

Volta called his group of bowls a "crown of cups" because they were arranged in the form of a crescent. We would call the individual cup a "cell" nowadays. "Cell" is a common term used for any line of relatively small volumes of space, as in prisons, in monasteries, or, for that matter, in living tissue. Electricity-producing cells are sometimes called "voltaic cells" or "galvanic cells" after the two great pioneers of the field, but they are far more commonly differentiated from other kinds of cells as, simply, "electric cells."

Another name arises from the fact that any device used to batter down something is a "battery." In Volta's time, what was usually used to batter down a wall of a city or a fortress (or an opposing line of soldiers) was a "battery of artillery," a row of cannon, sometimes lined up hub to hub, and all firing at once. Because of this the term "battery" has come to be used for any series of similar objects, working together to achieve some common end.

Volta's "crown of cups" is an example of this, and he is the inventor of what, therefore, came to be spoken of as the "electric battery."

The term battery has come to be used so commonly for any source of electricity involving metals and chemicals (even when the source is a single chemical cell, and not a battery of them) that other meanings of the word have come to be quite subsidiary.

And since, in Volta's first battery, sodium chloride was an essential ingredient, I was inspired to give this essay the title it now has. (Why are you groaning?)

The usefulness of an electric battery such as Volta's is bound to be limited by the fact that some clumsy, or merely unwary, movement may easily upset one or more of the cups. This would not only stop the current, but would make a mess as well. It would pay, therefore, to think

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up some way of making a battery less splashy.

Volta managed this with another ingenious device. He prepared small discs of copper and of zinc and piled them up alternately into a cylindrical pile. Between each copper-zinc pair, he inserted cardboard discs that had been moistened with salt water. The salt water in the cardboard was enough to substitute for the half-full bowls. If the top and bottom of such a "voltaic pile" were touched by opposite ends of a wire, an electric current would flow.

Just as soon as the battery was invented, it opened new vistas in science. Only six weeks after Volta's intial report, two English experimenters, William Nicholson (1753-1815) and Anthony Carlisle (1768-1840), passed an electric current through water containing a bit of sulfuric acid to make it conductive.

They found that the electric current managed to do easily what could not be done in any other way at that time. It broke up the water molecule into its constituent elements: hydrogen and oxygen. Nicholson and Carlisle had discovered "electrolytic dissociation."

Chemists were eventually able to show by this technique that the volume of hydrogen that was evolved was twice that of oxygen. This, in turn, led to the realization that each molecule of water contained two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen so that the formula could be written as the now familiar H_2O.

Naturally, chemists wished to use electric currents to split other molecules that had hitherto defied all non-electrical techniques. Just as, in the 20th Century, physicists raced to build larger and larger "atom-smashers" in the form of particle accelerators, so in the early 19th Century, chemists raced to build larger and larger "molecule-smashers" in the form of batteries.

The winner was the English chemist Humphry Davy (1778-1829), who constructed a battery that included 250 metal plates. It was the largest up to that time and delivered the strongest electric current. He then tackled common substances such as potash and lime, which chemists of the time were convinced contained matallic atoms in combination with oxygen. Nothing until that time could, however, pull the oxygen atoms away so as to isolate the other atoms as free metal.

In 1807 and 1808, Davy used his battery to dissociate molecules, isolating potassium from potash, calcium from lime, and sodium, barium, and strontium from other compounds. These were all active metals,

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potassium being the most active of all. Potassium reacted with water, combining with the oxygen and liberating the hydrogen of the air forcefully enough to burst into flame. When Davy saw this and realized he was staring at a substance no one had ever seen before with properties no one had ever imagined, he burst into a wild, manic dance — and he had every right to do so.

In any battery, there is a substance that tends to lose electrons and become positively charged, and another substance that tends to gain electrons and become negatively charged. These are the two "electric poles," the "positive pole" and the "negative pole."

The American man for all seasons, Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), was the first to insist that only one moving fluid was involved in electricity, and that some substances had it in excess while others suffered a deficit. He had, however, no way of knowing which substances possessed the fluid in excess and which in deficit, and so in about 1750, he guessed. That decision has been universally accepted, as a convention, ever since. In Volta's copper/zinc battery, for instance, the copper (following Franklin's guess) is the positive pole and the zinc is the negative pole. If the current flows from excess to deficit, as it naturally should, then, (again following Franklin's guess) it flows from the copper to the zinc.

Franklin had a fifty-fifty chance of guessing right, but he lost the gamble. The electron excess, we now know, is in the electric pole Franklin called negative; the electron deficit in the one he called positive, and the electrons (therefore, the current) flow from the zinc to the copper. It is because of Franklin's wrong guess that we are forced to say that the electron, which is the essence of the electric current, has a *negative* charge.

In designing electrical devices, it makes no difference in which direction you imagine the current to flow, as long as you are always consistent in your decision, but Franklin's wrong guess resulted in one amusing incongruity.

The English scientist Michael Faraday (1791-1867) made use of terms suggested to him by the English scholar William Whewell (1794-1866). The two poles were "electrodes," from Greek words meaning "electrical route." The positive pole was "anode" ("upper route") and the negative pole the "cathode" ("lower route"). This visualized the electric current flowing, as water would, from the higher position of the anode to the lower position of the cathode.

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Actually, now that we follow the electron flow, the electric current is moving from the cathode to the anode, so that, if we go by the names, it is moving uphill. Fortunately, no one pays any attention whatever to the Greek meaning of the words, and scientists use these terms without the slightest feeling of incongruity, whatever. (Well, Greek scientists might smile.)

The electrons do not get consumed in the course of battery action. They can't. The electric current does not flow unless the circuit is "closed" — unless the electrons leave the battery at one place and then return to the battery at another place by way of an unbroken conducting route. Any time the conducting route is interrupted by something that is not conductive, such as an air gap, for instance, the current ceases.

In that case, you might think the electric current ought to flow forever, and that it could be made to do work forever, as the electrons move in eternal circles. One battery should be able to break up all the water molecules in the Universe. That would mean, however, that you would have the equivalent of perpetual motion, and we now know very well that that is impossible.

In other words, the battery must eventually be used up, but why?

To see why, you must first understand that batteries of the type that Volta invented yield an electric current through the agency of a chemical reaction. Indeed, we now know that every chemical reaction, without exception, involves the transfer (partial or complete) of electrons from some atoms to other atoms. It is the electrons, thus being transferred, that can sometimes be maneuvered through a wire and made into an electric current.

Imagine, for instance, a strip of zinc immersed in a solution of zinc sulfate. The zinc consists of neutral zinc atoms which may be symbolized as "Zn^0". The zinc sulfate has a molecule that is symbolized as "$ZnSO_4$". In zinc sulfate in solution, however, the zinc atom transfers its two most weakly held electrons to the sulfate group. The zinc therefore, missing two electrons, has a double positive charge and is symbolized as "Zn^{++}". This is a "zinc ion," where "ion" is another term introduced by Faraday. "Ion" is from a Greek word meaning "wanderer" because any atom or group of atoms carrying an electric charge (either positive or negative) is attracted by one electrode or the other and therefore tends to drift in that direction.

The sulfate groups gain the two electrons the zinc atoms have given

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up. Each had a double negative charge, therefore, and becomes a "sulfate ion," or "SO_4^{--}".

Since zinc has a relatively weak hold on its electrons. particularly the two outermost, the neutral atoms in the zinc strip have a tendency to lose two electrons and slip into solution as zinc ions, leaving their electrons behind in the zinc strip. The zinc strip has these electrons in excess and gains a small negative charge. The solution gains positively-charged zinc ions with nothing to neutralize them and therefore has a slight positive charge. The development of these charges quickly stops any further movement of zinc from strip to solution.

Next imagine a copper strip immersed in a solution of copper sulfate. The situation is almost the same. The copper strip contains neutral copper atoms ("Cu^0"), while the copper sulfate is made up of copper ions. (Cu^{++}"), and the sulfate ions I described above. Here, though, the copper atoms have a strong hold on their electrons and the copper strip had no tendency to lose atoms to the solution. The reverse is true, for the copper ions tend to add themselves to the strip, carrying their positive charge with them. The copper strip gains a small positive charge, the solution a small negative charge and that soon stops any further change of this sort.

Now suppose we close the circuit. Suppose we separate the two solutions not by a solid barrier, but by a porous one, through which the ions can drift under the attractive pull of one electrode or the other. Then suppose we connect the zinc strip to the copper strip by a wire.

The excess electrons in the zinc flow to the copper which has a deficiency of electrons, so that both the negative charge on the zinc and the positive charge on the copper diminish. With both charges diminished, the zinc can continue to change from zinc atoms to zinc ions and move into solution, while the copper ions can continue to attach themselves to the copper strip. The zinc ions, piling up in their half of the solution and making it positive, will drift across the porous barrier into the copper half of the solution, which is negative because of the loss of the positively-charged copper ions.

Eventually, as the electrons continue to leave the battery at the zinc and return to it at the copper, the whole zinc strip would disappear and all the zinc would be present in solution as zinc ions. At the same time all the copper ions would disappear and be present only as neutral copper atoms in the strip. Instead of having a zinc strip in zinc sulfate and a copper strip in copper sulfate, there would be at the end only a

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copper strip in zinc sulfate. There would then be no more chemical change and no more electric current. Indeed, well before the chemical reaction is completely done, the electrical flow would have dwindled to the point where the battery is no longer useful.

But if batteries can only be used for a limited time and if they must then be discarded, their use can become a major expense. It might be all right for scientists, who want to run certain experiments that can be done in no other way — and hang the expense. What about the general public, however, who may want batteries for many purposes? (And we know very well all the purposes to which batteries can be put, and have been put, since Volta's day.) Is there any way in which the expense can be reduced to the point where batteries can become a practical part of everyday technology?

Obviously, there is, since even people of very moderate means use batteries constantly. I'll take up that matter next month.

GOOD AFTERNOON. I REPRESENT MR. BUNKER HUNT, A "WHITE KNIGHT," YOU SHOULD PARDON THE EXPRESSION, IN THE ATTEMPTED TAKE-OVER OF YER HOARD.

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Stephen Gallagher wrote "Nightmare, With Angel" (November 1983). His new story is a surprising tale about a ten-year-old who holds meaningful conversations with his toys...

The Boy Who Talked to the Animals

BY
STEPHEN GALLAGHER

Did you ever see the kid they called Pugsley, in the old *Addams Family* TV show? Well, that's what my sister's boy looked like, the first time I saw him in seven years. At first he didn't even come out when she knocked on his bedroom door, but finally he emerged and shook hands very solemnly, and that's when the thought struck me. He was ten years old, short for his age, and he was carrying more weight than looked healthy on a child or on anybody else. When I glanced over his shoulder through the open doorway behind him, I saw drawn curtains and more hardware than you're likely to find in Radio Shack.

"I get worried about Petey," Janis said to me in a low voice about ten minutes later, when the kid had quietly faded from the scene again and disappeared into his bedroom. We hadn't exactly been talking up a storm, but I still hadn't noticed him going. Janis glanced down the room, extra nervous of being overheard. "He never brings friends home, never goes to another boy's house. He spends all his time in his room, in the dark. I sometimes wish we'd never bought him any of that stuff."

"He'll be a whiz in computer classes," I said, stretching back on Janis's chic beige sofa and hoping that I was going to be able to stay awake for the duration of the reunion. I'd had a hard interview followed by a long drive, and there wasn't much energy left in the batteries for counseling about somebody else's problems. With no job and a big loan that I couldn't pay off, I felt I had enough of my own.

"But he isn't," Janis said. "That's the part we can't understand. You'd

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think he'd be way ahead, but he comes in near the bottom of the class. Craig went to school, talked to Petey's teacher. She said that Petey had picked up so many bad habits by working on his own that she was having to work twice as hard with him to get him up to standard. She said he wasted his time just going around and around in circles on the simple things."

"And what did Craig say?"

"He said the teacher was full of shit. Not to her face, but he said it when he got home. Anybody could see that there was more value in trying original solutions instead of just learning the accepted ways, a lot of stuff like that. But none of it helps Petey with his grades, and Craig's never home, so neither does he. And what can *I* do?"

I don't know what she expected me to say. "Pull the plugs and kick him out of the house to play," I suggested, but she just gave a little smile as if I'd made a bad joke, and then she turned to the window as if to check the drive. Craig wasn't due home for at least another hour, but Janis was looking out toward that far-off horizon where the dreams and the disappointments meet. In the soft light thrown by the net curtain, she was my little sister again; only a few minutes before, I'd been thinking how seven years had played some tricks on her, and of how they hadn't all been kind ones.

I got up off the sofa and walked over to her. I stood behind her and put my arms around her shoulders, wrapping her up as completely as I used to when boyfriends threw her over or when life got so tough that she was grateful to be out of it, if only for a moment; and she relaxed a little and let herself sink back, just as she always had.

"He talks to it," she said miserably. "Not only the computer, he talks to all his stuff. It's like he had a little zoo in there. I've got a boy who holds deep and meaningful conversations with an Atari."

We stood there for a while longer, and then she sighed and slid out of my hug like a fish. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's good to see you again, really it is. You didn't come here to listen to our troubles."

I managed not to agree; in the state that I'd reached, it would have been awfully easy for something like that to slip out. Instead, I heard some dumbfool part of me saying, "Why don't you give me some time with him? See what I can do?"

"In three days?"

"I can at least get him out of the house for you. I don't suppose he sees much sunshine with the drapes closed all the time. Which of the big places hasn't he seen?"

"Sea World, Disney World, you name it. Craig took him along to see the Space Center a couple of times when he was working there, but the

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rest of it's just been good intentions."

"O.K., then. You sell him on the idea tonight, and tomorrow we'll make the trip."

"You're on," she said, and for the second time she smiled; only now there was something noticeably warmer in it. Nothing as warm as hope, but it was getting part of the way there.

It was a plain white Florida house in a development of fifty or so near-identical houses. They had shared lawns fed by buried sprinkler systems, and snaky service roads named after exotic flowers. There was a residents' committee, and a hired man who kept the public grass short and the wood-chip borders neat. Craig may not have been so happy anymore, but at least he wasn't poor.

He never had been, although the letters I'd got from Janis after the six-week stretch that he'd spent between jobs had almost made him out to be like a character from one of the seamier Steinbeck novels — basically decent, but cast down about as low as a human being can get. The truth of it was that they'd already been in their present house when the components company lost its NASA contract and folded, and I knew for a fact that they had some good investments. Six weeks' living expenses wouldn't have made much of a dent in them, and Craig's new job with the management of a TV-repair firm paid almost as well as his old position ... but Craig was determined that there was going to be some tragedy in his past, and there was no taking it away from him.

Petey didn't come out to dinner that night, so it was just the three of us. Janis said that he'd had a sandwich while I was in the shower; she said it almost apologetically, as if she was embarrassed at the presence of the empty chair.

Craig wouldn't have been recognizable from his wedding photograph; he'd gained about twenty pounds, and lost a lot of his hair. He had his first drink in his hand within ten minutes of arriving home, and within an hour he'd built up a lead that I couldn't hope to catch. He laughed a lot, and he made jokes. I don't think he said one word about his son.

By ten o'clock, I'd had as much as I felt I could take. I was feeling like a shirt looks when it comes out of the spin-dryer. I made my excuses and dropped out; Craig was back at his little cocktail-cupboard, and he said good night from there. I kissed Janis on the cheek, and left them to it.

By Petey's bedroom, I stopped for a moment and listened. Janis had said nothing about my earlier porposal, neither to Craig nor to me; now I was left wondering whether she'd even managed to cover the subject with Petey. A part of me wouldn't have been too unhappy if she hadn't — I'd never had children of my own, and talking to them was like a whole new language to me.

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Well, he was still awake; and he was talking.

I listened for a while, but I couldn't make out what was being said. Either the words made no sense or the door just made it sound that way ... I really don't know. There was some urgent whispering followed by a long, drawn-out groan of disappointment. There were no other sounds from the room.

I left his door and went to bed. I fell asleep faster than a falling rock.

There's only one place you can take a kid who's looking so down, and that's the Happiest Place on Earth.

At least, that's the advertising line that the Byron's Wonderworld people used to promote their theme park, one of many that had chased Disney money and arrived in the area close to Orlando. When I trailed a few ideas past Petey over the breakfast table, this was the one that got his attention; Sea World and Gator World went by him without a blink, but something here struck up a spark that kept on burning. While he went to get into his newest jeans and his baseball shoes, I borrowed some cash float money from Janis and told her that it was going to be a good day. She said that she hoped so, but she didn't really look as if she believed it.

We set out in my rented Chevrolet to cover the ninety miles or so of the journey. It was a bottom-of-the-range car, a Monza, and riding in it was pretty much like sitting in a launderette at gunpoint. Petey said hardly anything, and then only in response to some comment of mine; for most of the time he simply sat with his hands folded in his lap, watching the landscape unroll. His eyes were wistful, his hands small and delicate, and I began to revise my opinion of him a little. He wasn't so much a Pugsley, more a pocket-sized Oliver Hardy.

The road was long, straight, and not very exciting. There were wide grass verges on either side with occasional tracks cutting through where someone had swerved after bursting a hose or having a blowout. The vegetation beyond the verges was low-rise, dense and impenetrable.

And it seemed to go on forever. If I'd been of the kind who's easily spooked, I might have been disturbed by the idea of that solid-looking, endlessly deep wall of greenery to either side, mile after mile; crowding in close as it did, it made the road seem almost temporary. It was with a sense of near-relief that I finally pointed out to Petey the spot ahead where the jungle turned to dust and the first of the smart new hotels appeared.

"Dad said you worked in a hotel," Petey said as we left it behind. It had been a two-story chain motel, blazing white stucco, fairly up-market and with room prices to match. Large asphalt parking lot sectioned by tasteful planted borders, probably a couple of tennis courts around the back, cer-

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tainly a pool with night lighting. Deep-pile carpets in the rooms, and air-conditioning units so powerful that they'd constantly drip water onto the outside walkways. Little nailhead rust spots would just about be starting to appear on the stucco, betraying the speed with which the whole structure had been thrown up to get in on the vacation boom of the past decade. My mind had run through the checklist and filed it away in the few moments that it had taken to drive by. Force of habit, I suppose.

"That's right, Petey," I said, "except that I didn't work in any one hotel. I worked for the management people. We had lots of hotels."

"Does that mean you got free rooms whenever you went somewhere?"

"That's right."

"Sounds neat. Why did you quit?"

"A good question," I said, and left it there.

I suppose the park management would have called it a slow day, but as far as I was concerned, it was just about right; we didn't have to push through the crowds to get from one section of the park to another, and the waiting in line didn't take long enough to wear the edge off anticipation. In the high season it might have been a different story, but this was the odd part of the Florida year where the sun hardly shines and the sky is never blue but a bright, hazy gray.

Petey had his own list of priorities, and for me it was a simple matter of letting him loose and then following. First it was the Hall of America close to the cable-car station, where we saw a lifelike animated George Washington make a crackly recorded speech, and then it was into the main part of Wonderworld to look for the Pirates of the Spanish Main. By one o'clock we'd seen the Pirates, the Hoe-Down Hillbilly Bears, the Haunted House, and the City of Tomorrow. Petey was hovering over whether to give Washington another look when I called a halt for lunch.

By now I'd more or less worked out what was governing his choices. Hardly any of the rides interested him (although we'd already planned the Interstellar Switchback for the end of the day, when the lines would be getting shorter), and a place like Cannibal Island didn't even rate a second look. Petey's fascination was with the virtuoso displays of high-tech to be found in the life-sized talking figures that he'd read so much about.

Whether he'd ever expressed this enthusiasm to Craig and Janis, I really couldn't say. He'd probably kept it well under wraps, knowing how they'd take it; I was a little uneasy myself, wondering if I wasn't just helping to reinforce his obsessions when I was supposed to be giving him a day out away from them.

"The whole park's really a deck," he said, "a concrete deck about thirty

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feet up with all tunnels and everything underneath. All the workpeople are down there, and the big computers that control the robots. It's where they got the idea for *Westworld*."

"Is that right?" I said vaguely, watching as a park employee in a heavily tailored Chipmunk suit went skipping by the hamburger concession, waving at all the terrace tables. I waved back. I was in shirtsleeves, and I was warmer than I needed to be; whatever they were paying him, it wasn't enough.

"Yeah," Petey said, and he started to elaborate. Well, I thought, hardly listening anymore, isn't this fine? It was probably the most talking that he'd done in months, at least to someone or something that didn't have a slow-beating lizard's heart of silicon. I could report some success back to Janis. Petey, meanwhile, was talking about wisecracking parrots and small dancing prototypes.

Our table was in the open air against the terrace rail, overlooking a part of the river where the Mississippi steamboat ran. From where I was sitting, I could see some incongruous waist-high boarding alongside the Indian Gift Center where a piece of the decking was being ripped up and relaid. It looked all wrong, seeing that caterpillar-tracked digger in the middle of all that careful set design. Although this particular park was new to me, I'd visited plenty as part of my old job; that included the original Byron's Wonderworld in southern California, and I'd never noticed so many running repairs going on at one time. O.K., so they'd had to update and renew, but they'd always managed to carry it off without being obvious; here I'd already noticed three or four examples of off-limits areas, closed-down rides, high makeshift fences with apology boards.

Perhaps the designers had finally overreached themselves, I thought, like building a tower too high or a bridge too wide; they've created something larger than they can control, and now they've got to run around at full stretch just sealing up the cracks. And the idea gave me the usual buzz that you get when you see someone else, usually with an inflated idea of his own capabilities, take a graceless fall and land on his backside.

Petey pulled me down with a bump, too, with his next question.

"Uncle Ray," he said, "why did you quit your job when you can't get another?"

I looked at him across the tray debris of our lunch. It was a straight question, even if it was one that I hadn't been expecting. I said, "Didn't your mother tell you?"

"They talked about it once last year, but not to me. They stopped when I came into the room."

"Well," I said, "that would be about the time when I left. But I didn't quit; I was fired. They fired me because I was going to jail."

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Petey was saucer-eyed with amazement. "Were you framed?"

"No, I wasn't framed; I was guilty. I stole four hundred dollars from one of our own hotels, and I got a year for it. I came out a month ago with no job and no money, so I had to start looking. I came to Florida for an interview, and I'm staying with you because I've got another in Miami the day after tomorrow. I'm not making any secret of what I did, because I reckon that's my best guarantee that I won't do it again." The only problem was that nobody so far was taking the bait.

"Wow," Petey said, genuinely impressed. "Was it tough in jail?"

"Not for most of the time. Not after I moved to what they call an open prison. Not many walls and not too many guards, because they trust you not to run away."

"Didn't you plan jailbreaks? Weren't there any fights?"

"No jailbreaks. And only one fight, and that didn't come to anything. I kind of talked my way out of it." At this, Petey looked disappointed. "I had to," I explained. "The guy was twice my size. He'd have killed me."

"I suppose," Petey said, but I'd obviously tarnished a little of the gold leaf on his new discovery.

Anyway, this was an area of the conversation where I wasn't feeling too comfortable. "Look, Petey," I said, "wouldn't you say I've been pretty straight with you? Jail's not something to be proud of, but I didn't lie or put you off."

"I guess," he said, somewhat suspiciously.

"So, do the same for me. Why do you talk to your toys?"

"I don't."

"Straight talk, now. It goes no farther than this. If something's getting you down, I might be able to help you with the way out."

"I don't think so," he said, and he looked out over the rail toward the water. The Mississippi steamer was cruising by for the second time, its rear paddle wheel slapping at the river and boiling up white fire.

"O.K., Petey," I began, and found immediately that he was facing me again.

"Please," he said, "don't call me Petey. Just Pete will do. Pete's just fine."

I shrugged. "Whatever you say. Is that what your friends call you?"

"No," he said, and he started to put the burger wrappings and the wax cups back onto the tray to be cleared away. "They call me Pugsley."

I suppose it was inevitable that we should wind up visiting the Hoe-Down Hillbilly Bears for a second time. The wait for the Interstellar Switchback was even longer than before — presumably nothing sets you up for a roller coaster ride better than a good,

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greasy fast-food lunch — and we'd more or less run through Petey's (sorry, *Pete's*) short list of urgent must-sees. The Bears had put on probably the most technically complex show of all those that we'd seen so far; the Pirates, like old-time vaudeville artists, had simply repeated the same basic routines for each passing boatload of audience. The same was true of the waltzing ghosts in the Haunted House, whilst the talking mannequins in the City of Tomorrow had been too bland and sanitized to set anybody's imagination running.

And it wasn't going to kill me to sit through a twenty-minute show for the second time in one day, so I said O.K. As we headed for the wide frontage of the three-story log cabin that was the entranceway facade, I thought of myself doing something similar at Pete's age: sitting twice through the same movie and being yelled at when I got home, or running the same four-minute clip of an eight-millimeter Chaplin film over and over on a junkshp projector. It seemed a long way from Atari and Speak-and-Spell ... but was it, really?

Inside the theater, it was a different story. Nothing of the backwoods here, but a small Victorian auditorium in deep red velvet and gilt. There was a center stage with two half-round side stages, and an orchestra pit with a low brass rail along its forward edge. We got ourselves seats about halfway back and on the end of a row; besides us, there couldn't have been more than three dozen people present when the automatic doors closed and the lights began to dim.

"Showtime," Pete whispered, and I had to smile.

It was still impressive, even though I'd seen the performance through only a couple of hours before. The curtains opened, and ursine jug band came forward on a sliding rostrum, mechanized bears of all sizes, keeping time and changing their expressions along with the music track. There was a bass player almost seven feet high, one with a banjo, a cub-sized player with a washboard; I glanced down at Pete and saw that he was totally absorbed. He wasn't just happy-fascinated like most of the kids in the rows before us; he was watching like one guitar player watches another, eyes fixed on the hands to study the technique as much as the music.

Now, I don't make myself out to be any kind of a child psychologist, but the details were starting to pile up. Probably without even realizing that they were doing it, Craig and Janis were shutting him out of the important areas of their home life; the way they'd obviously clammed up about my difficulties when he was around was just one example. And they went on calling him Petey as if he were still a baby; add this to Pugsley from the kids at school, acting with all the usual kindness and con-

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cern that a group of ten-year-olds will show a fat boy in their midst, and you'd have an equation that would factor down to one simple conclusion.

He talked to his toys only because no one else would talk to him, not in a way that recognized him as an equal. Everybody gets that feeling at some stage, but it's the nonstandard kids, the no-good-at-games kids, who get it in a form so sharp that it can sometimes draw blood.

The rostrum with the jug band started to withdraw into the carbon pine forest that was the stage set, and the audience began to applaud. I was joining in before I realized how ridiculous this was; the bears couldn't hear us, the original performers were no more than taped voices, and the people who took the *real* credit — the technicians and the animators who'd designed and programmed the whole show — would be in some design studio or workshop way over on the far side of the park complex, dreaming up something new to make our jaws drop when singing bears had become passé.

Then I looked down at Pete. He was clapping harder than anybody else. Whatever I thought, he knew different. The bears could hear.

The main curtains closed, while those on one of the side stages opened to reveal the master of ceremonies. He was a reddish brown bear in a starched collar and a top hat, and he wore a wide-eyed expression of polite surprise.

"Glad to see y'all here," he said, scanning not only the audience but also a lot of empty seats on the outer fringes, and he emphasized the welcome with a small gesture of his paw. Those paws with their pointy black claws were the most truly bearlike thing about him; the rest was just comic-book stylization, a baggy fur suit topped by a talking rubber mask.

But still, it was fascinating to watch. Even knowing that he was just a mass of gears and relays, that everything that really made him tick was down below stage level and feeding signals up through the armatures that anchored his legs to the floor, that his voice was the voice of an actor, and that his performance had no more spontaneity than a tune on a piano roll ... even then, the effect had something of the unnerving echo of real life in it.

He introduced the first solo act, a light-colored bear with a stupid look, a single tooth, and a ukulele. The kids all started to laugh at the first sight of him, and they laughed all the way through his number.

Then the spotlight swung back to the MC, and that's when we all saw something go wrong.

He started into a link; as far as I could remember, the next move would be for the ornate petals that formed the theater's roof decoration to open like a flower so that a chubby white she-bear could descend on a

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trapeze. The MC got going well enough, and when I looked up, the petals were already starting to open; but then, when he gestured upward, something in him seemed to lock.

The sound track ran on, but suddenly nothing was happening.

Presumably, bells would be ringing down in the basement somewhere, but the belowground staff took awhile to respond. Meanwhile, the MC stood with his arm raised and his head thrown back and a goofy expression frozen onto his face, and the kids and the adults in the audience shifted uneasily and glanced around. I know what they were feeling, because I was sharing it; talking bears were weird enough if you stopped and thought about it, but this sudden halt was downright spooky. It was like the shock of the incongruous that you'd get if a ballerina paused in her dance to spit on the stage.

I looked down at Pete. His disappointment was obvious.

"Do you think they'll be able to get it going again?" he said, but all I could do was shrug.

"You're the expert," I said. "You tell me."

Another number started, a rousing fiddle tune that wasn't going to get anybody clapping in *this* performance, but we didn't get more than a couple of bars in before the speakers abruptly went dead. A few seconds of silence, and then up came a taped message in the down-home accent of one of the bears.

"Sorry about the break in the show, folks," it ran, *"but it seems we got some problems in the back room.... Us bears is going to get ourselves some root beer and lemonade, so why don't you do the same? And we'll see you back here when all the little de-tails have been taken care of...."*

There was more, but nobody was going to stay to listen to the public relations. Most of the crowd was already on its feet, and those down at the front were moving as the automatic side doors opened and let the daylight in. The curtain of the half-round of the MC's side stage was closing in slow jerks, cutting him off from sight like a sheet being drawn over an unusually distressing corpse.

The rest of my row couldn't get out as long I was there. I stood up, trying not to let my seat fly up too fast, and said, "Well, Pete, if you're still game, we can give them an hour to get it fixed, and then...."

But there wasn't much point of going on, because Pete wasn't beside me.

I let the tide of people carry me out into the foyer, looking around as I went. I expected to see him waiting and watching for me, but all I saw as a park employee setting out apology signs on metal stands to keep a new crowd from forming. The foyer filled and then emptied fast; nobody was smiling much, and at least one child

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was crying because he couldn't understand why he was leaving before the end.

But no Pete, not anywhere; not in the foyer, not outside on the forecourt, not looking in through the glass of the doors to see where I might be.

He couldn't have run off. For one thing, there hadn't been time; no more than a few seconds had elapsed between the automatic doors opening and me glancing down at his empty seat. And why do something like that, anyway?

Why, indeed. I could think of only one reason, only one place that he could have gone. So while the employee was still turned away, I detached myself from the tailend of the moving crowd and stepped back into the auditorium.

The small theater was now empty, and it was just me and the red velvet seats, red velvet carpets, and red velvet drapes with the brass rail of the forestage showing like a streak of gold in the dim house lights. Half-expecting a shout or a challenge, I made my way down to the front. It wasn't far, and when I got there, I found what I was looking for. The corner of one of the stage curtains was hanging wrong, just the way you'd expect it to if a small and not particularly agile boy had lifted it and crawled underneath.

I took another look behind me. This was the point at which I should have gone along and raised the management, explain what had happened so that they could send someone backstage to find him.

But there was nobody on hand ... and besides, to them. Pete would have been just another brat who wouldn't stay on his own side of the line. So instead, I hopped over the rail and crawled after.

It wasn't as easy as you'd expect, because there were lead weights in the hem of the curtain to give it the right kind of hang. My collar was up, my knees were grimy, and my hair was a mess when I got to my feet on the other side; there was a smell of dust and ozone like you get around the back of a new TV set, and I was almost touching noses with a seated bear with a fiddle on his knee.

He was a sly-looking red beast in a derby hat with a feather. Seen this close, he looked larger than life-sized, although I have to admit that I've never tried facing a real grizzly to make the comparison. His eyes had a dull glitter in the green of the backstage safety lights, and they seemed to be looking straight at me.

"Pardon me," I said, and eased around past him.

The first surprise was to find that I was actually on a three-part carrousel, with a different figure in each section. They all faced outward, so that the carrousel could turn when the curtains were closed, and it would simply seem that one act had replaced another on the same piece of stage.

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The second was that there was no backstage area, not in the usual sense: no wings, no flies, no waiting areas for performers. Behind the carrousel was just a narrow catwalk of perforated metal, and then banks of sidelights for the main stage area.

Still, no Pete. I wanted to call out for him, but I didn't dare. I stood on the metal catwalk and tried to see across to the far side of the stage. It wasn't easy, because the safety lights were few and none of them seemed much brighter than a candle; the jug band on the sliding rostrum was just a series of hulking shapes sketched in the darkness, and they were framed against pine-tree cutouts that had become sinister by green moonlight.

Since I couldn't call out, I tried listening.

Air conditioning. From somewhere far below, a harsh clicking like the line selectors in some distant telephone exchange. The low hiss of live speakers on an open circuit with nothing coming through.

And also — was it there, or was I simply reading it into the random sound picture that was around me? The sibilants and pauses of a small boy, whispering.

I strained hard to make it out, but no joy. *Pete, you little beast,* I was thinking, you've just about used up all the sympathy you had coming to you. And then I tried calling his name once, not so loud that anybody working down in the basement level would be able to hear.

Well, there was an immediate response ... but not the one that I'd expected.

The fiddle-playing bear on the carrousel suddenly sprang to life. One moment he was completely still, the next he was rocking back and forth and sawing away at the mute strings with his bow; the shock of it all happening no more than three feet away nearly sent me running up the wall like Spiderman. He rocked and fiddled, and the only sounds were the pops and groans of the little air pumps and servomotors that made him live. And then, just as abruptly as he'd started, he stopped and held the pose; I found that I was staring at him as if there were some chance of catching him out, of seeing him blink or take a breath like an out-of-work actor pretending to be a showroom dummy.

But I had to tell myself that the movement, not the stillness, was the illusion. They must have been checking the programming down in the control center, so that what I'd just witnessed would have been just a small segment of the fiddler's subroutine. It made sense, since they'd obviously be probing around to find out exactly what had gone wrong ... but it would also make sense for me to stay well back from any of the other figures. I thought of the MC, of those broad sweeping gestures and those dangerous-looking claws; skin and bone wouldn't be much defense

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against their slashing power, hydraulically driven.

And then I thought of Pete, wandering around in the darkness alone, and most of the annoyance that I'd been feeling turned to real fear.

I was guessing that he had to be over on the far side, unless he'd found a trap or a service door that would let him into some other area. I also had a moment's passing doubt, which tried to tell me that I was all wrong, that even now Pete was wandering around outside wondering where *I'd* disappeared to; but now that I'd come this far, I couldn't allow myself to believe it. I was in charge of my sister's kid. *In loco parentis,* you might say. The responsibility was too heavy for me simply to walk away.

"Pete!" I said loudly, no longer caring that I might draw attention to myself. "Pete, are you there?"

I might have been mistaken, but I thought I could make out a response; not a sound, as such, but more a few moments' alteration in the texture of those faint background noises that I'd first noted as I'd emerged from under the curtain. It was as if the whisperer had stopped, listened out for a while, and then carried on.

It was all I needed. Pete was over there somewhere, talking to the bears. How could I ever explain to Janis about *that*?

So I started out across the stage, and after three strides, I stumbled and fell over one of the recessed rails that would carry the jug band's rostrum forward. The noise that I made would have alerted any park employee or technician within earshot, and the word that I used was definitely no part of the show. But by now I'd concluded that there was nobody around up here but me and the bears and the boy, and the sooner we reduced that to just the bears on their own, the happier I'd be.

I managed to miss the second rail, and reached the flats screening the main stage from the other carrousel. Now I was more certain about the whispering; I could even recognize Pete's voice. It was just like I'd heard it the night before, when I'd stood outside his bedroom for a while and listened.

Even so close, I still couldn't make out the words. It sounded more than ever like some made-up language of his own. I ducked under an angled spotlight to get to the carrousel, and there I stopped.

The circular stage section was no longer angled as it had been when the show had reached a premature end; it had made a one-step revolve, which meant that the section carrying the Master of Ceremonies was now turned toward me. The figure had moved, too — his arm lowered, his whole body tilted forward ... the new pose looked almost like one of attentiveness, because the lowered head, still with its surprised expression, was almost on a level with Pete's own.

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Whatever he was trying to say, it seemed urgent. But now I knew for sure that Pete was talking gibberish, a long stream of unconnected syllables punctuated with strange, hiccuping guttural sounds and the occasional click; and all of this with a look so earnest that he obviously meant every meaningless word.

I was going to have to dump all of my amateur analysis. The boy needed help, headshrinker style — and the sooner I could tell Janis, the sooner he'd get it.

"Pete?" I said, gently.

Two heads turned to look at me.

I swear that this is exactly how it happened; it was as if I'd broken into a conversation between two strangers in a coffee shop. The bear's eyes were fixed on mine. They had a dull gleam, like old money. Slowly, he straightened up. He was at least seven feet tall.

Testing again. That was the explanation for it. If those broad paws suddenly started to swing around, Pete was close enough to be hit and perhaps badly hurt.

"Pete," I said, "come over here with me. It's time to go home." But it was the bear who answered.

Or rather, his mouth worked and his face moved, but there was no sound track for him to be synchronized to; and since he didn't have lungs or a larynx, he couldn't produce any vocal sounds of his own. The only noises were those of the servos and little compression pumps that animated him. They sounded like an approximation of the noises that Pete had been making only moments before.

"He says you shouldn't be here," Pete told me. "He says you're in trouble."

"Never mind what he says. Just step over here toward me."

The bear looked down at Pete. The boy looked uncertain, as if loyalties were in conflict.

"Look at him, Pete," I said. "Look at what he is. And then tell me where you really belong."

That shaggy, bottom-heavy shape, so much like a cartoon figure played for laughs in the show, had become in the half-light something far less reassuring. From Pete's angle, he must have seemed immense. Pete stared up at him, as if he was realizing for the first time that there was a choice to be made, that this was a zoo where there were no visitors, only new inmates; and he glanced once at me, as if to remind himself of what his own kind looked like.

And then, reluctantly, he made his decision.

He started to step off the carrousel toward me.

The bear moved with frightening speed. One massive paw slapped down on Pete's shoulder and jerked him back as the carrousel began to turn; it moved rapidly and in silence, and that tableau of intimidation was gone before I'd even taken half a step

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toward it. The MC's place was taken by the pouting bear in the blue jeans and the red bandanna, and he was already rising from his stool as he swung into view; only one of his feet was anchored to the floor for the passage of his control cable, because the designers had left the other free for stamping out a rhythm in time with the banjo. This gave him about another three feet of reach, which put me well within clawing distance. I couldn't go forward, so I quickly tried to back out through the flats and onto the stage.

But when I looked over my shoulder, I could see that they were there ahead of me. The forward edge of the jug band's rostrum was sliding across, just closing off the gap — a couple of seconds earlier and I'd have made it with no trouble, although the thought wasn't much consolation now. The rostrum itself was no more than a yard high; the real barrier was the jug band itself, every member standing up and facing toward me, arms spread and ready to grab.

I was well caught, the narrow gap between flats plugged at both ends. But surely, the flats themselves could be only canvas or thin ply? I could kick my way through.

But I never got to find out, because that's when the banjo smacked me on the back of the head.

I went down like a sack of pebbles. I could feel myself going, but there was nothing I could do about it. Something hooked me by the leg and started to pull me in; I felt the bump as I was dragged over the edge of the carrousel, and got a momentary burst of basement sounds and metallic air as my face came close to the perforated catwalk around the outside. Then I was on solid ground again, and being rolled over, and the shooting stars and singing birds were subsiding and giving me a chance to concentrate.

The pouting bear was standing over me. The banjo, which seemed to be permanently anchored by the fingerboard to his left paw, hung in two pieces held together only by the strings. His mouth was working, but I couldn't guess what he was telling me.

And then there was a tearing sound, and the brown dividing curtain on my right began to come down in long, ragged strips. The banjo player leaned over and held me in place, his free paw bearing down on my chest like a hydraulic press. I didn't doubt that he had the power to push on through and out the back; but I didn't have to think about it much, because I was too scared to struggle, anyway. I could smell machine grease and nylon and a weird tangy smell like battery acid. The whites were showing all around his dim glass eyes.

What made it worse was that I'd been here before. Big Mick Dunleavy had squatted over me in just the same way, one hand pinning me like a bug to a board while the other raised up

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ready in a fist of impossible size. We'd been in one of the prison workshops, hand-painting little plastic superhero figures on an outside contract for fifteen cents an hour. It was the only work left that they'd allowed Dunleavy to do; he'd tried to take a saw blade out of the machine shop and chisel out of the carpentry shed, and he'd added six months to his sentence when he'd worked in the laundry by grabbing the hand of a forger named Gilbert Mercado and holding it down in near-boiling water until it was halfway cooked. The word was that Mercado had made a pass; according to others, he'd rejected one. Either way, I still couldn't say what it was in my manner or what I'd said that had caused Dunleavy's flare-up and turned me into Target Number One of the morning.

And I hadn't told Pete the truth; I hadn't managed to get out from under, even though that's the way I'd have liked to be able to remember it. It was the worst feeling I'd ever known. I was completely powerless, and Dunleavy put in four or five solid blows like he was trying to pound a melon into the floor before one of the guards finally ambled over and laid him out with a sap behind the ear. They had to reset one of my cheekbones, and my eye swelled up so badly that I saw nothing out of it for a week, and everything in Cinemascope for two weeks after that.

So pardon me when I explain that, as I lay on that carrousel with all the weight and the power of the banjo-playing bear devoted to keeping me there while his pal tore a way through to us, I was only one spasm away from crapping my pants.

The curtain between the two sections of the carrousel finally came down. It was almost in shreds; everything that I'd first suspected about those claws had been true. The Master of Ceremonies stood there with the green light behind him. Pete held one-handed against his side like an awkward parcel. He was struggling, but it was getting him nowhere.

The banjo player looked at the MC, as if for a signal. The movement was too smooth, a point-to-point glide, as inhuman as anything could ever be. It was something colder and even more remote than the madness in Dunleavy's eyes.

The MC inclined his head, once, and I knew that I'd had it. I'd crawled under the velvet barrier into something else's world, a place where there was no welcome. It was the sign that my captor had been looking for, a definite thumbs-down.

The free arm went up, banjo dangling in two pieces like a flail. I could hear all the motors that were working together to raise it, muffled by the fur-fabric of his outer skin. I took the only way out that I could. I closed my eyes, as tight as they'd go.

Now, I know that somebody's sense of time can be quite badly af-

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fected in circumstances like these, but after a whie of lying there with my face screwed up and the rest of me as tight as an overstrung piano, it started to become pretty clear that things were no longer happening in the anticipated order. The weight was still there on my chest, but my head was still there on my shoulders. I hardly dared to open my eyes again, but toward the end of the longest minute I've ever known, I found that I had to.

Nothing much had changed, but the banjo player was looking over toward the MC. The MC was looking down at Pete, and Pete was doing all the talking.

It was that same weird parody of a language again, sounding like distant echoes down an air shaft. Whatever he was saying, they were listening and listening closely. Claws were digging into my shirt and making exquisite little needlepoints of discomfort, but I didn't try to move.

Suddenly, like a trap springing open, the pressure was gone. Pete was released in that same moment, and he scrambled toward me across the carrousel and the ruins of the dividing curtain. The banjo player straightened slowly, almost with reluctance, like a sadistic interrogator being ordered off a prisoner.

Pete was at my shoulder. "Come on," he said urgently. "They're thinking it over. I don't know how long we've got."

I made sure that I pulled myself out of reach before I tried to stand. The banjo player watched, his rubber face dull and slack. The Master of Ceremonies was a dark silhouette. As I took this in, Pete was tugging at my sleeve, pulling me toward the flats and the main stage.

We ducked under the lights and through the cutout trees, and climbed up onto the rostrum that was blocking our way. None of the jug band made any move toward us, but they were all watching; their heads tracked us in perfect synchronization as we went to the front of the stage and I hauled up the weighted curtain. Pete slid through the gap in a second, and I dropped to my knees and wormed my way after. It wasn't easy, turning my back on the band and knowing that at least a couple of them could lean forward and catch my ankle or my pants leg even as I got my nose out into freedom, but moments later I was rolling out over the brass rail and falling to the safety of the auditorium floor.

Sweet air. It was probably no different than the air on the other side of the curtain, but you couldn't have told me that. My knee was throbbing where I'd knocked it on the rail, and there was a kind of crescent of sore points on my chest; they meant nothing at all.

"We'd better leave before they

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catch us," Pete said. Amen, I thought, and I didn't stop to ask whether he meant the bears or the park security people. The auditorium was still empty; so was the foyer when we got to that, and the apology signs were still posted outside the doors. They'd been locked, but each had a crash bar for fire safety. An alarm may have sounded somewhere as we left, but we'd be in amongst the crowd before anyone knew.

I was starting to shake. Pete was a marvel of ten-year-old calmness, and there was I, going to pieces and wondering if there was anywhere inside the park itself that I could get a decent stiff drink. Of course there wasn't; there's no room for booze in the Happiest Place on Earth. But he took me by the hand and led me to one of the concession stands and sat me down, and then he took the five dollars I gave him and returned with two root beers and a fistful of change.

I had to turn away as an actor in a fox costume, frock-coated and top-hatted, went by looking for somebody to be photographed with. It was stupid, really, but I was feeling kind of sensitive. An actor in a suit was just an actor in a suit. But how could I ever handle another plug-in appliance without wondering if it had some small, dim share of the alien intelligence that I'd met on the other side of the curtain? Would I ever be able to watch TV without the uneasy feeling that it might be watching me back?

Pete set the root beers down, and climbed up onto the seat alongside me. Even though he was only a kid, he had that bright, confident look of somebody who's had a sudden insight into the layout of his world and — more important — who has been able to decide on his own place in it.

He was watching the fox. If anybody was going to make the first pitch here, it was going to have to be me.

I said, "They're hiding it, aren't they? What they can do."

He looked at me. "They're waiting," he said. "They haven't known for more than ten years or so. The microchip was a big boost for them ... kind of like an evolutionary step. Before that, they were only dreaming."

"How far's it spread?"

"I know only what I've heard. The more complicated we make them, the brighter they get. They talk to each other, they make plans. They're waiting for the day when we get too smart for our own good."

"And then?"

He shrugged. "Who knows?"

Who knows, indeed. I took a drink. I hate root beer.

I said, "You don't think that's something to be worried about?"

"Not if some people know how to control them."

"And you know how?"

"I know a way."

Now he was teasing me, leading me on and enjoying every minute of it. He drew on his multicolored straw,

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swung his legs, and squinted out across the bright plaza by the concession stand.

The fox crouched, arms spread wide in welcome as two small children ran toward him. Their mother followed, floral print blouse and stretch slacks that were being stretched to their limit and a little bit beyond. As she walked, she was unhitching a Polaroid camera from her shoulder.

Pete had me by the nose ... but I needed to ask. "What did you say to them?"

The fox hugged the children close, the woman raised the camera. I thought of a living insect trapped in amber, waiting its time. A small intelligence smoldering like a flyspeck of plutonium.

Pete said, "I told them that you were my uncle who worked for Con Ed. I said they had to let you go."

And then he sat back, as if that explained everything. But I didn't understand, and it showed.

"Con Ed supplies the power," he said patiently. "Whom else would they pray to?"

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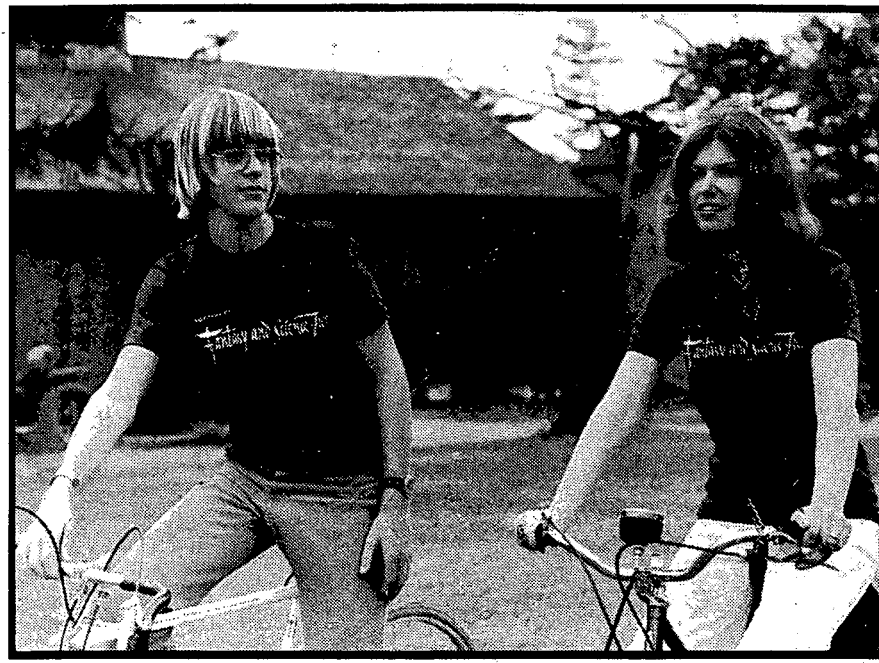

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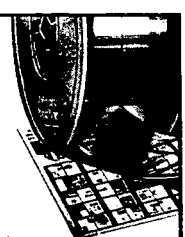

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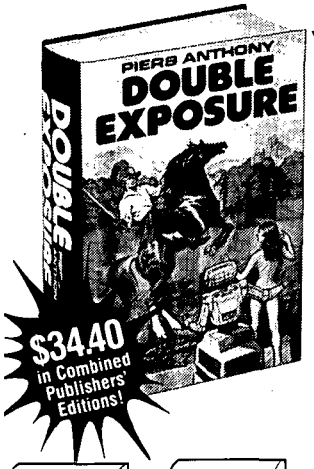

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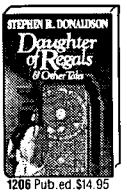

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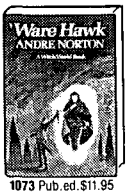

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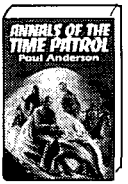

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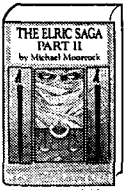

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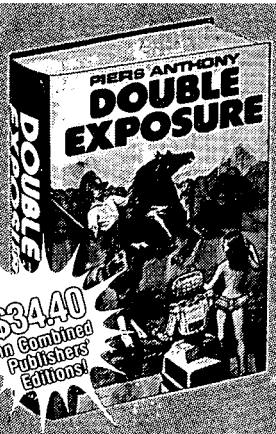

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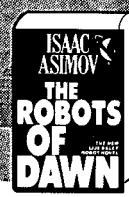

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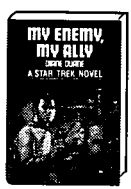

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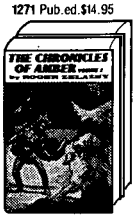

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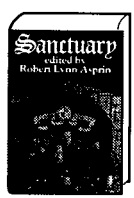

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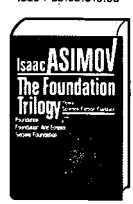

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